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GOD'S DEBT TO MAN

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
Department of Exegetical Theology
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Sacred Theology

by
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Purpose

A sincere and faithful child of God is struck down by some sudden misfortune or disaster. Both the suffering saint and the world about him are often quick to ask: "God, how could You?" The obvious implication of this question is, of course: "Lord, You have slipped up in Your arithmetic. You certainly did not owe that loyal child of Yours such a crushing blow. He has been serving You faithfully and well. And now this is the way You reward him?"

Such reasoning reflects the inbred conviction that God is obligated to bless us if we obey Him and to punish us if we do not. In this paper we shall examine this thesis to see if it is Scripturally warranted. We shall center our investigation on this question: Does God, under any circumstances, owe man anything?

Method of Procedure

Anyone who makes even a superficial study of the Scriptural teaching on "reward" will immediately recognize the following paradox: God has a debt to man and, at the same time, He does not. The very titles of the first two chapters reflect this fact. Chapter one marshalls the

Bible evidence historically, and the chief stress is upon the fact that God does owe a reward to man. Chapter two presents the Scriptural material systematically, and the major emphasis is upon the fact that God does not have a debt to man. Chapter three offers a few brief remarks on the purposes behind the reward concept, and in the conclusion we submit perhaps the only possible solution to the paradox.

"Do well, and you will prosper!"

Even the most casual Bible reader cannot help but notice how often in the Pentateuch material prosperity depends on obedience to God's laws.¹ This is obvious already in Patriarchal times. Abraham receives from the Lord the revelation of Sodom's forthcoming destruction because of his promised future greatness and his obedience to God's ways (Gen. 18:17-19). The Lord makes it unmistakably plain that His blessings to Abraham are the result of a wholehearted obedience to the divine will, a loyalty that would have killed for God had not the Angel intervened (Gen. 22:16-18). That God is here speaking of the blessings of the covenant is obvious from the language used. For the words are a strong echo of the original covenant promise in Genesis 12:1-3. One should also consider here the witness

¹Gen. 22:16-18; Ex. 23:24; 15:26; 23:25ff.; Lev. 26:3-20; Deut. 5:29; 7:12-24; 12:28; 16:20; 19:8-9; 26:12-19; 28:1-14.

CHAPTER II

HE HAS ONE, HE DOES NOT HAVE ONE

(AN HISTORICAL APPROACH)

The Old Testament

The Pentateuch

"Do well, and you will prosper!"

Even the most casual Bible reader cannot help but notice how often in the Pentateuch material prosperity depends on obedience to God's laws.¹ This is obvious already in Patriarchal times. Abraham receives from the Lord the revelation of Sodom's forthcoming destruction because of his promised future greatness and his obedience to God's ways (Gen. 18:17-19). The Lord makes it unmistakably plain that His blessings to Abraham are the result of a wholehearted obedience to the divine will, a loyalty that would have killed for God had not the Angel intervened (Gen. 22:16-18). That God is here speaking of the blessings of the covenant is obvious from the language used. For the words are a strong echo of the original covenant promise in Genesis 12:1-3. One should also consider here the witness

¹Gen. 22:16-18; Ex. 20:6; 15:26; 23:25ff.; Lev. 26:3-20; Deut. 5:29; 7:12-24; 12:28; 16:20; 19:8-9; 26:12-19; 28:1-14.

of the New Testament in James 2:21-24. It seems evident that in James' mind Abraham's imputed righteousness was not just the result of his willingness to believe God's promises. That righteousness was equally the result of Abraham's absolute obedience to God's commands. For, as James indicates, Abraham's faith achieved its true goal by his works, as, for example, the work of being willing to sacrifice his only son. And thus, "the scripture was fulfilled which says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was imputed to him for righteousness,' and he was called 'the friend of God'" (James 2:23).

Perhaps the outstanding Pentateuchal references that should be mentioned here are Deuteronomy 28 and Leviticus 26. These chapters make it perfectly plain that the health and happiness of both individual Israelite and the entire nation are in direct proportion to a strict and constant observance of the divine will (Deut. 28:1-14). In fact, this obedience was a matter of life or death (Deut. 6:24-25). Obedience to parents is especially important and carries with it the assurance of a long and prosperous life (Deut. 5:16). The capture and possession of Palestine depend upon Israel's walking God's paths (Ex. 20:12).

The Lex Talionis

The very heart and stress of this law is that man's fortune is in strict keeping with his deserts. It is true,

the emphasis is upon the negative, retribution in kind. But the principle behind this law is precisely this: One gets exactly what one deserves.

The roots of this law are undefined. Wuerthwein remarks: "Der Ursprung des israelitischen Vergeltungsglaubens liegt jenseits des fuer uns historisch Beobachten."² In its earliest examples it is simply taken for granted (Gen. 3:17; 4:11-16; 9:25). The curse can be upon the entire nation (Deut. 28:15-68), or it can be upon the individual (Gen. 4:11-16). So tremendous was God's love for His chosen people that He promised to curse anyone who dared to curse His Hebrews. This was the promise given to Abraham (Gen. 12:3), to Jacob (Gen. 27:29), and to the entire nation. It is not just people that God curses; He also pronounces His wrath against inanimate objects. Because of men, the ground is cursed and destined to produce thorns and thistles (Gen. 3:17). Genesis 8:21 implies that the flood was a curse upon the ground for the sake of man's sin. In Deuteronomy 7:25ff. the curse is against gold and silver that adorn pagan idols. Certain sins are singled out as meriting a special curse. The divine punishment is especially severe upon those who curse their parents. The

²E. Wuerthwein, "Der Vergeltungsglaube im Alten Testament," Theologisches Woerterbuch zum Neuen Testament, edited by Gerhard Kittel (Stuttgart: Verlag von W. Kohlhammer, 1938), IV, 710.

penalty is death (Ex. 21:17). One should also be very careful not to curse a ruler of the people (Ex. 22:28) or a deaf person (Lev. 19:14). There is a fearful curse against an unfaithful wife (Num. 5:11-28). Among others, there are at least two sins which apparently cannot be pardoned: (1) reviling God's name (Lev. 24:10-23); and (2) being defiantly brazen in one's sin (Num. 15:30-31). Those who are guilty of this kind of conduct must bear their own sin. They have no transgression-bearing scapegoat (Lev. 16:6-10). This is the greatest curse of all--a denial of divine pardon.

Both Old and New Testaments make it plain that vengeance belongs to the Lord alone.³ Not vengeance, but love is the responsibility of brother toward brother (Lev. 19:18).⁴ Such a command is rather difficult to harmonize with the "eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth" injunctions (Ex. 21:23; Lev. 24:20; Deut. 19:21). Often Israel has no choice in the matter. It must take vengeance because of God's order (Lev. 18:20-30; 24:10-23; Deut. 19). In carrying out this command the Jews are simply acting as the Lord's tool (Num. 31:3). It is the Lord who enables Jephthah to avenge himself upon the Ammonites (Judges 11:

³Deut. 32:25; Ps. 94:1; Is. 59:17; Rom. 12:19; Heb. 10:30-31.

⁴Cf. also 1 Sam. 24:12; 2 Sam. 22:48; Ps. 18:47; Rom. 12:19; 1 Thess. 4:6.

36). It is apparently because of this divine command and approval of human vengeance that men often take things into their own hands and practice revenge upon their foes. This is true of the entire Hebrew nation (Joshua 10:13; Esther 8:13), and of individuals in that nation (Judges 15:7ff.; 1 Sam. 14:24; 1 Sam. 18:25). It should be remembered, however, that the cause was considered to be God's, the enemy regarded as the foe of the Lord. For whoever was Israel's enemy was an enemy of God, and therefore the vengeance was really His in their hands (Num. 31:2-3). This is apparent also from the fact that the government is God's avenger to execute His wrath upon the wicked (Rom. 13:4).

One might cite a number of factors responsible for the preeminence of this retribution motif in Jewish thought and theology. For one thing, there is the Hebrew concept of Jahweh as a personal deity. Wuerthwein comments:

In uebrigen aber hat sie sich mit dem Glauben an einen persoentlichen Gott verbunden und ist damit erst zum Vergeltungsglauben im eigentlichen Sinne geworden.⁵

Beneath this personal God man stands naked and bare, and to this God he is accountable for his actions and life. Thus, it is not blind fate, but a personal God who controls man's destiny. In the light of this fact, the doctrine of divine retribution is not simply historical narrative; it is an

⁵Wuerthwein, op. cit., p. 710.

interpretation of that narrative.⁶ For example, Israel had to endure the shame and suffering of the Babylonian captivity. It did not just happen. This captivity had to follow Israel's stiff-necked rebellion against God, even as the night the day.

But are there exceptions? Does every sinner receive punishment, and every righteous man divine blessing? If the Lex Talionis is as fixed and unalterable as the law of day and night, is God Himself absolutely bound to it, and can the just man rightfully demand his blessing, while the wicked person is inevitably and inescapably doomed to his fate? The answer to both questions must be in the negative.

Rowley comments:

Yet, as will be seen, there is no biblical doctrine of the rigid equation of desert and fortune, and it is recognized that frequently the righteous are involved in the disasters the unrighteous bring upon the community to which they belong. Righteous and unrighteous are members of a common society and are alike involved in its experiences. For the sin of society, like the sin of individuals, is sin against God and against its members as individuals as well as against its own corporate body.⁷

Jeremiah confronts the problem squarely. In keeping with the correct and traditional Jewish belief he maintains that the Hebrews of his day were justly suffering for their own sins and not the offenses of their fathers (Jer. 14:11ff.;

⁶Ibid., p. 711.

⁷H. H. Rowley, The Faith of Israel (London: SCM Press LTD, 1956), pp. 103-104.

15:1ff.)). Yet he inconsistently states that God would punish the sins of his contemporaries upon their children (Jer. 16:3). Ezekiel takes up the same problem, and his ultimate answer is that each person gets exactly what he deserves from the Lord (Ezk. 18). This, of course, is in keeping with the Deuteronomic school which seems to present this one great fact: If the nation obeys God, it will prosper; if it does not, it will suffer. Commenting on this Rowley remarks:

All this presupposes that desert and fortune, at least on the national scale, are linked together. Broadly speaking, there is truth in this, though it is not the whole truth. Still less is it the whole truth when it is individualized and used as a basis for the doctrine that every man gets precisely what he deserves.⁸

Rowley's remarks are essentially correct. The fact that the righteous often suffer while the wicked prosper, or that the righteous are sometimes cursed along with the wicked while the sinners are sometimes blessed together with the godly only points up that there is no unbreakable Biblical law of desert and fortune.⁹

Man's logical conclusion

Despite the fact that the Lex Talionis, as we have just shown, had its exceptions, man still drew the conclusion

⁸Ibid., p. 109.

⁹The Lot story is especially illustrative in this connection (Gen. 19). Certainly Lot did not deserve God's gracious rescue.

that divine blessing had to follow human obedience, and a heavenly curse human disobedience. This thought is expressed in the entire book of Job. For this is the problem, the puzzling and painful contradiction: A saint is suffering, and that cannot happen, since saints are only blessed by God with material prosperity. God is bound to bless the righteous, because He has promised to do so. In the very beginning of the book Satan implies that Job's is a selfish integrity since he knows God is bound to bless him if he follows the divine commands (Job 1:6-12). It is interesting to note that the Lord does not deny this Satanic implication against Job. He refuses to comment one way or another.

Is forgiveness merited?

One passage merits special attention here, and that is Genesis 4:7. Here we are told that Cain's acceptance before God depends on his doing well. Is the implication that Cain can achieve pardon only through his righteousness? The problem, of course, centers in the translation and meaning of the infinitive לַעֲשׂוֹת . It must be granted that the verb עָשָׂה is sometimes used to signify a lifting up,

¹³ This is the interpretation adopted by Leupold, op. cit., p. 200. He also cites Luther as agreeing with him. See Gen. 4:22 where the expression is לַעֲשׂוֹת , and indicates acceptance. The Septuagint is not too helpful. It translates לַעֲשׂוֹת with finite verb forms, obviously believing that עָשָׂה here refers to the offering of Cain's sacrifice.

a removal of sin.¹⁰ Is that meaning present here?¹¹

Perhaps the most natural explanation of this difficult infinitive is to be found in the previous verse. The Lord has just asked Cain the reason for his fallen, frowning face. In the light of this question the most natural meaning of verse 7 would then be: "If you do well, you can go about with a big, broad grin on your face." This is the interpretation suggested by Gesenius.¹² On this point Leupold quotes Luther as saying:

"Is such a remark not just a little too trite and obvious? Of course, if you do right, you wear a cheerful countenance and a free and happy glance; but is that of sufficient importance for a divine utterance to Cain?"¹³

A third possibility would be to supply לִפְנֵי as the implied object of the infinitive. The expression "lift up the face" would then convey the idea of acceptance.¹⁴

¹⁰Ps. 32:5; 85:3; Job 7:21; Gen. 50:17; Ex. 32:32; Num. 14:18; 1 Sam. 15:25.

¹¹Leupold, for one, denies that it is. Cf. H. C. Leupold, Exposition of Genesis (Columbus, Ohio: The Wartburg Press, 1942), p. 472.

¹²William Gesenius, Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures, translated by S. T. Tregelles (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1950), p. 568.

¹³Leupold, op. cit., p. 200.

¹⁴This is the interpretation adopted by Leupold, op. cit., p. 200. He also cites Luther as agreeing with him. See Gen. 32:21 where the expression is לִפְנֵי, and indicates acceptance. The Septuagint is not too helpful. It translates לִפְנֵי with finite verb προσέειπεν, evidently believing that לִפְנֵי here refers to the offering of Cain's sacrifice.

the case, the The Prophets and the Writings references thus

The righteous life guarantees God's reward, the wicked life His punishment

Certainly, there is no evidence lacking in this period to demonstrate that God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked (Ps. 18:25-26; 125:4-5; 18:20-24). It is this principle of divine recompense that prompted prayers such as these from the lips of Old Testament saints:

The Lord rewarded me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands he recompensed me. For I have kept the ways of the Lord, and have not wickedly departed from my God. For all his ordinances were before me. I was blameless before him, and I kept myself from guilt. Therefore, the Lord has recompensed me according to my righteousness, according to the cleanness of my hands in his sight.¹⁵

The Hebrew words translated "reward" and "recompense" are שָׁלַם and $\text{נָתַן$ respectively. Neither of these words conveys the exclusive meaning of merited reward.¹⁶

The Septuagint translates both verbs with $\alpha\upsilon\tau\alpha\pi\omicron\delta\acute{\iota}\sigma\omega\mu\epsilon\iota$ which does suggest the repayment of a debt.¹⁷ If this is

¹⁵Ps. 18:20-24, in the Revised Standard Version (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1946).

¹⁶See Brown-Driver-Briggs, Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), p. 969; Gesenius, op. cit., p. 175.

¹⁷Gf. Liddell and Scott, An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon (New York: American Book Co., 1898), p. 75; also Luke 14:14; Rom. 11:35; 12:19; 1 Thess. 3:19; 2 Thess. 1:6; Luke 14:12; Rom. 11:9.

the case, then this is one of the clearest references thus far uncovered which indicates that God's goodness to man is a deserved reward, a debt which he must discharge in return for man's righteousness. At any rate, these words are a far cry from the humble confession of Psalm 51, or the tax collector's words in Luke 18:13: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." Yet, one ought not overlook the context of the entire Psalm in which the poet concentrates on God's merciful deliverance, and especially verses 28-29 (Hebrew) where it is stated that God rescues only humble people and makes low the proud.¹⁸

God is influenced by man's conduct

Human conduct does indeed influence divine action. Amendment of life prevents God's punishment (Jer. 26:13). God's mercy and pardon are given only to the penitent (Jer. 36:3). Man's entire well-being depends on his obedience to the Lord's laws.¹⁹ Certainly the whole tenor of the Wisdom Psalms is that prosperity and a long life issue from

¹⁸On the Hebrew terms for "reward" see Wuerthwein, op. cit., pp. 700-701. On the reward of God to man, three points should be noted: (1) only the righteous can hope for it; (2) this reward should not be regarded as a strict recompense according to a stipulated agreement, but as a sign of God's grace and blessing; (3) God rewards the righteous in this life and in the life to come.

¹⁹Josh. 1:7-8; 1 Kings 9:4-9; Ps. 1:1-3; 34:12-22; 119:passim; 128; Prov. 3:9-10; Is. 1:19-20; 58:6-14; Jer. 7:5-7; Hos. 10:12.

a meditation in, and obedience to, God's commandments.²⁰ What blessings to those who possess wisdom (Prov. 3:13-26)! What a long and happy life will come to those who tame their unruly tongues (Ps. 34:13)! And those who give generously to the Lord will have filled barns and bursting wine vats (Prov. 3:9-10). Only those who bring the prescribed tithes can expect such bumper crops (Mal. 3:10-11). Yet, not only is the length and joy of one's life dependent upon adherence to God's commands; life itself is (Amos 5:14-15; Ezk. 18:5-9). It is by his faithfulness that the just man lives (Hab. 2:4).

This Habakkuk passage, of course, poses a number of problems. In the first place, there are some serious textual difficulties in the beginning of the verse.²¹ Secondly, there is the question as to the "just man." To whom does this refer--to the individual Israelite or to the entire nation? Thirdly, and most important, how shall we interpret אֱמֶנֶת? The Septuagint translates this word with πίστις, and St. Paul in both Romans and Galatians takes the word in the sense of "faith" as opposed to "works,"

²⁰Some classic examples are, of course, Psalms 1, 119 and 128. Yet note how often in Psalm 119 the poet stresses God's grace and mercy (40, 58, 88, 93, 116, 124, 132, 149, 156, 159). The psalmist lives by God's righteousness.

²¹Charles L. Taylor, Jr., "The Book of Habakkuk," The Interpreter's Bible, edited by George Arthur Buttrich and Others (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1951), VI, 988-989.

faith which justifies a man because of Christ's merits. However, in the light of other Old Testament references, "faithfulness" is certainly a legitimate rendering here.²² It seems apparent that the writer to the Hebrews also places this meaning on the word (Heb. 10:37-38).²³ At any rate, it must be admitted that the Pauline usage of "faith" as opposed to "works," established from this passage, is rather remote and foreign to the Habakkuk context. It is readily granted, however, that אֱמֶנֶת is derived from the Hebrew verb אָמַן , which is the common Old Testament word for "believe," and that Abraham's faith was reckoned to him for righteousness (Gen. 15:6). George Foot Moore offers the following comment:

Both, (that is, אֱמֶנֶת), like אָמַן , fides, and the English "faith" itself, cover fidelity as well as confidence, and as in the famous case of Hab. 2,4, "The righteous man shall live by his faith," the interpreter may be at a loss whether to say "faith" or "faithfulness."²⁴

²²See Ex. 17:2; 2 Chron. 19:9; Hos. 2:22 (Hebrew); Prov. 14:5; Is. 11:5; Prov. 12:17; 12:22; 28:30; also George Adam Smith, The Book of the Twelve Prophets, in The Expositor's Bible, edited by W. Robertson Nicoll (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1928), XXVIII, 130-131; Taylor, op. cit., p. 989.

²³Carl Friedrich Keil, Biblical Commentary on the Book of Habakkuk, in Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament, edited by C. F. Keil and F. Delitsch, translated from the German by James Martin (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1900), XXV, No. 2, pp. 73-74.

²⁴George Foot Moore, Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era--The Age of the Tannaim (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927), II, 237-238.

"Be faithful and live!"

Life itself depends upon faithfulness to the divine will (Hab. 2:4). Is this "life" limited to earthly existence? In most instances we would have to answer in the affirmative. In fact, there are at least five passages in this historical period which stoutly deny any life after death.²⁵ It must be remembered that these are Old Testament passages. The very adjective itself suggests a preliminary, incomplete revelation that should not be placed on the same level with God's Word to men in the New Testament.²⁶ Certainly, this fact must be considered whenever one seeks to discover a clearly defined eschatology in the Old Testament Scriptures. It simply is not present. There seem to be hints and overtones of a resurrection and after-life.²⁷ But these are like bright shafts of sun light that filter and break briefly through the lowering clouds. It is not until the Old Testament Apocrypha,²⁸ and more precisely in the New Testament, with its heralding of the

²⁵Ps. 30:9; 88:10-12; Eccl. 9:5-6; 9:10; Is. 38:18-19.

²⁶See Heb. 10:13.

²⁷For example, Deut. 32:29; Ps. 49:15; Hos. 6:2; 13:14; Ezk. 37:1-14; Is. 26:19; Ps. 69:28. For a fine comprehensive survey of Jewish eschatology, see Moore, op. cit., pp. 290-394.

²⁸See, for example: 2 Esdras 13:25-50; 16:73-78; 7:29; 6:23; 7:30-32; 4:40-42; 7:35; 9:7-8; 7:46-70; 8:51-54; Wisdom 1:15; 2:22-23; 4:1-2; 5:15-16; Tobit 13:14.

risen Christ, that the unveiled sun of a fully developed eschatology bursts upon the Biblical scene.

Obedience brings eternal reward

In Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 we are told that man's chief duty is to fear God and obey His laws, since the Lord will one day "bring every deed into judgment with every secret thing, whether good or evil." Is this the final day of reckoning? In Psalm 73:24 the poet receives fresh courage and hope for his downcast and embittered soul, puzzled and even angered at the prosperity of the wicked while he must suffer, as he reminds himself that the Lord will "afterward receive me to glory." The question is: Does לְעוֹלָם here refer to a post-death glory or simply to the honor of a more prosperous and pain-free life in the future? At any rate, we can agree with William Temple:

In his fellowship with God he [the poet of Psalm 73] has found that nothing matters in comparison with that fellowship. He had been perplexed that the ungodly should prosper, and almost thought of throwing in his lot with them. But now he knows that, however great their possessions, they are truly destitute, while the man who has found fellowship with God is rich though he possess nothing. That is the real solution--not an answer to the riddle, but the attainment of a state of mind in which there is no desire to ask it.²⁹

In Isaiah 62:11 we read that the Lord is on His way to Zion, bringing with Him salvation, reward, and recompense.

²⁹William Temple, Nature, Man and God (London: Macmillan and Co., 1934), p. 43.

The context unmistakably suggests deliverance from the Exile, although one might perhaps see in these words a veiled reference to the final appearance of God to give men their eternal reward.³⁰

God judges man according to his deeds

We note four facts about this divine judgment. First, it is both the individual³¹ and the entire nation which may be cursed for the sin of one of its citizens.³² Sometimes the righteous suffer with the wicked; sometimes the wicked are blessed with the righteous. God follows no unbreakably rigid rule in this matter. This, of course, is the tension with which Jeremiah wrestles. His contemporaries were suffering for their own sins (Jer. 14:11ff.; 15:1ff.), yet their follies would bring God's wrath down upon their children (16:3). Certainly, this does not suggest a consistent teaching of a rigid equation of desert and

³⁰Compare Jesus' blending of Jerusalem's destruction with that of the world's end and the final judgment (Luke 21:32).

³¹Ezk. 18:14-30; 33:7-20.

³²Joshua 7. The entire nation suffers for the sin of Achan.

fortune.³³ Secondly, God's judgment is always right and just. He never makes a mistake. That fact is evidenced, among other passages, in Psalm 9:8; 92:15; 145:17. Thirdly, God will one day judge the entire world. We read, for example, in Psalm 96:13 that the Lord is on His way to "judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with his truth." Obviously, the poet is not personifying "truth" in this passage, and yet, one is tempted to think of Truth Incarnate, Jesus Christ, whom God has chosen to "judge the world in righteousness."³⁴ Finally, God's judgment will effect deliverance for His saints. In Isaiah 33:22 we are told that the Lord, the Judge and King, will save His people. And in Daniel 7:22 we read that the "Ancient of Days will come, judgment will be given, and God's saints will receive the gift of the kingdom."

The bargain of a vow

Does a human vow ever control or command divine action? Does the pledge of the suppliant to do this or

³³For an excellent discussion of this matter of individual and corporate holiness and blessing, guilt and punishment, see Rowley, op. cit., pp. 105ff.; Walther Eichrodt, Theologie des Alten Testaments (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1950), Teil 3, pp. 101-111, 141-142; Edmund Jacob, Theology of the Old Testament, translated from the German by Arthur Heathcote and Philip Allcock (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1958), pp. 153-157.

³⁴Acts 17:31. Paul is apparently thinking here of Psalm 96:13 which he applies to Christ.

that ever compel God to fulfill the desire of the petitioner, and, perhaps, even change the divine will? It almost seems that this is the case, and we submit, among others, the following passages as evidence. The first is in 2 Kings 20:1-7. This is, of course, the familiar story of King Hezekiah's sickness, the announcement of his imminent death, his prayer to the Lord, and his sudden recovery. It is verse 3 of this account that interests us the most. For here Hezekiah implies that God is duty-bound, absolutely obligated to heal him and keep him alive because of his impeccable faithfulness to the divine will and way. It must be admitted that there is no mention here of a vow, either kept or broken. Nevertheless, the implication is that God is bound to carry out His end of the bargain and restore Hezekiah to health since the king has so faithfully upheld his end of the agreement and remained loyal to the Lord's commands. Are we to assume from this that God actually changed His mind because of Hezekiah's prayer, that He needed this reminder from the king lest He should forget or overlook His promise of blessing to those who obediently follow Him? Obviously, this cannot be the case, that the divine will is controlled by the human. For such an agreement would make of God little more than a cosmic "bell-hop" obediently awaiting the summons, the whimsical wishes of each of His creatures. And this is sheer nonsense. On the other hand, one ought not to tone down the naivete of a James

who blandly asserts that the fervent, sincere prayers of God's saints have tremendous power in their effects (James 5:16). In fact, the unmistakable message of James 5:13-18 is the boundless power men have at their command in prayer.

We now turn to 1 Samuel 1:11, where Hannah vows that if the Lord gives her a much desired child, she will give the child back to God. In verse 17 Eli assures Hannah that the Lord has heard and answered her prayer. Although it is not specifically stated that God honored Hannah's request because of her vow, the very fact that she included such a vow in her prayer indicates that she, at least, must have felt she had a better chance of receiving what she wanted from the Lord if she made this promise to Him.³⁵

The problem of the books of Job and Habakkuk

The book of Job

This problem of undeserved suffering for the righteous and unmerited prosperity for the wicked finds its most classic presentation in the book of Job. A righteous man is suffering, and that cannot happen. It is as impossible

³⁵One is reminded here of David's words in 2 Samuel 12:22-23 where he indicates there is no more point to his weeping and fasting now that his child has died. The implication is, of course, as David himself makes plain, that his fasting and tears might help to keep the sick child alive, might move God to be gracious and restore the child.

as it is for God to break His covenant-promise to bless those who obey Him. This simply cannot be, since "blessing is the natural development of righteousness."³⁶ Yet it is happening. There is a Job, a righteous man struck down by every imaginable affliction. This only proves that God is lawless and arbitrary, that He cannot be counted on to keep His covenant promises. "He is not as the chief upholding his covenant, but as the despot who knows no other law than his own greatness and arbitrariness."³⁷ Yet, this is impossible, since the moment God breaks His word, He ceases to be God. This is the problem of the book of Job. By His covenant-promise God is bound to bless a righteous man, yet He fails to meet His obligation. He fails to discharge His debt.

But perhaps Job is not as holy as he thinks he is and deserves his sufferings after all. Obviously, Job does not consider himself the equal of God, and, although he stoutly maintains his integrity throughout, he does admit to little sins. Yet, these are not grievous enough to alter his inner righteous constitution, and these small sins God can and must forgive.³⁸

³⁶ J. Pedersen, Israel, Its Life and Culture, translated from the Swedish by Geoffrey Cumberledge (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), I-II, 364.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 366.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 365.

Job's relationship with God is obviously a far cry from that of the Psalmist in Psalm 51.

his attitude toward God is not that of a creature acknowledging creaturiness. It is rather that of a man who (a) uses his sense of innocence as a claim upon the Deity's will and (b) when unable to reconcile his righteousness with his fate challenges the Deity's justice and stands erect as the judge of his creator.³⁹

Obviously there is no room in this relationship for grace. Job vindicates Satan's assertion that man is selfish in his righteousness. Religion is a bargain, "morality the coin that purchases peace."⁴⁰ Yet, Job admits that as a human being he is not absolutely pure before God (14:1-6). He has committed youthful sins (13:26). But his punishment is far out of proportion to his petty sins. God therefore attacks him without cause (9:17). The all-knowing God must realize he is not guilty (10:7). To the end, Job clings to his integrity (27:6). It is his trophy, his crown of glory and badge of honor (31:36). Unashamedly he catalogues his long list of virtuous deeds (30:1ff.). Thereby he shows that he has not relinquished his faith in the doctrine of retribution.

God is responsible for Job's plight. In breaking His covenant-promise to bless the righteous the Lord has shown

³⁹Samuel Terrien, "The Book of Job," The Interpreter's Bible, edited by George Arthur Buttrich and Others (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1954), III, 899.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 900.

Himself arbitrary, unjust and immoral. God is attacking the wrong person; for the heart of the problem is not in Job, but in God. The Deity treats him like a capricious tyrant (9:18-19), an evil judge (9:20-29), a wild animal who shreds his flesh (16:9), a ruthless warrior (6:4,9; 16:12-14; 19:8-12).

Job's logic is not without fault. He accuses God of injustice, yet expects from Him a just reward for his righteousness (23:3-7). He seeks after God (23:8-10), yet is terrified by His presence (23:11-17). Still he upholds his integrity at all costs, and his last word

is the vain glory of a Titan who hopes to meet God as a prince welcomes an equal (31:37), and to take advantage of a divine encounter for the ultimate assertion of the self. There is no place for divine grace in his quest. . . . He asks for recognition of his worth, but not for mercy; and there lies the root of his "sickness unto death."⁴¹

Job's counseling friends offer the following solutions to his vexing problem. (1) There really is no problem at all. For when the righteous suffer this is proof that they are not righteous. They only think they are, whereas, in reality, they are sinners in disguise (5:6,7; 11:11; 22). When the wicked prosper, it is just temporary (20:5; 15:20; 18:5). (2) God cannot take man's righteousness from him because man has no righteousness before God. Man cannot claim anything from God because he cannot give God anything.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 899.

Therefore God is always just (22:2-3; 4:17-20). Job answers:

All right then, why does not this powerful God use this great strength to defend and succor the frail creature to whom He has bound Himself by a covenant instead of vexing and tormenting him? (10; 13:25-14:3).

Job's friends insist that God is so great and powerful that He is raised above all human claims and demands. He is eternally just no matter what happens to man. Man may be perfectly righteous, but still, all he can ever do, is to humble himself before this great God and thus be exalted (8:5; 11:13ff.; 22:3). There is in this, however, a glaring lack of logic. The friends maintain that man's righteousness is to no avail before God, yet they steadfastly insist that it will be vindicated by God at all costs and in every case. The friends assert that God is not bound by human righteousness; yet they claim that the righteous must prosper by saying that if he does not, he is not righteous.⁴²

Is there a solution to Job's problem? Rowley feels that Job was suffering to vindicate God's faith in him.⁴³ He suffers as an innocent man for this purpose. The real answer lies in the theophany. By this vision of God Job learns in awe and wonder that God stands beyond and above the tradition, the ideals, and the wisdom of

⁴²We are indebted for these insights to Pedersen, op. cit., p. 371; see also Terrien, op. cit., p. 900.

⁴³Rowley, op. cit., p. 115.

men. He who had expected to "come forth as gold" (23:10) bows in adoration and repentance (42:1-6). In the presence of the most holy God all pain is stilled, for grace is sufficient. . . . Job becomes aware of his sinfulness at the very instant of his reconciliation. He is saved at the moment of his surrender. He receives all when he surrenders all. God's judgment is none other than the blossoming of his mercy.⁴⁴

The theophany impresses upon Job that man can never remonstrate with his Maker; for God's sphere of justice is wider than His creature's. Man has his righteousness, and God has His, and if the two do not harmonize, then it is not that God's justice is contrary to man's; it transcends it (Is. 55:8-9), goes deeper than man's ability to fathom it.⁴⁵

What of Job's later blessings? Is not this proof that the righteous man must prosper in the end? This need not be the case. For Job's final blessings are not an inevitable close to the book. Whether or not the righteous man gets God's blessing "he must humble himself before God the great giver of everything, knowing that man who receives everything has no claim upon his great giver."⁴⁶

⁴⁴Terrien, op. cit., p. 902. For an admirable presentation of the breakdown of Job's self-sufficiency, see Terrien, op. cit., pp. 900-901.

⁴⁵See Pedersen, op. cit., p. 373.

⁴⁶Ibid.

The book of Habakkuk

The problem here is quite similar to that of Job. How can a good God permit the righteous to suffer and evil men to triumph over them? Righteousness must bring with it prosperity and wickedness its proper punishment. But this is not the case. The answer is given in 2:4: "The just man shall live by his faithfulness." "Faith" is too narrow a translation for **אֱמוּנָה**. In the Old Testament the word connotes the idea of physical steadfastness. As such it applies to Moses' arms upheld by Aaron and Har over the battle with the Amalekites (Ex. 17:2). It is also used of faithful performance of public office (2 Chron. 19:9); of fidelity between spouses (Hosea 2:22 (Hebrew)); of faithful testimony (Prov. 14:5); of fairness in judgment (Is. 11:5); of truth in speech (Prov. 12:17); of sincere and honest dealing (Prov. 12:22). It is true that faith in God is the root of all this faithfulness. The verb **אָמַן** from which **אֱמוּנָה** is derived clearly shows this. Yet, in Habakkuk 2:4 the word refers to that which faith produces, that is,

endurance, steadfastness, integrity. Let the righteous, however baffled his faith be by experience, hold on in loyalty to God and duty, and he shall live. Though St. Paul as we have said used the Greek rendering of faith for the enforcement of trust in God's mercy through Jesus Christ as the secret of forgiveness and life, it is rather to Habakkuk's wider intention of patience and fidelity that the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews returns in his fuller quotation of the verse

(Heb. 10:37,38). . . .⁴⁷

But does this answer really solve the problem? Charles Taylor points out:

The answer given in Hab. 2:4 is that the just shall live by being faithful. This does not solve the problem, but it clearly is a part of the right response to it. Hold steady! Maintain integrity! Remember that the vision is hastening to its inevitable fulfillment and will not be late. In God's good time, not man's, all is well and will be well. Therefore, be ready, be attentive, be on the watch for whatever the Lord chooses to reveal. Fidelity through good or ill until that time shall fully come is the mark of every "just man!"⁴⁸

Perhaps the real answer lies in the concluding verses of chapter three. For here the author makes it plain that "through thick and thin" he has fellowship with God, and that is all that counts; that is virtue's deepest and most coveted reward. The problem of innocent suffering is not thereby solved. Yet in the blessed realization of the divine fellowship even in affliction one reaches the state of mind in which there is little desire to raise the question.⁴⁹ The greatest reward that man could ever have or hope for is God Himself. "I am thy very great reward" is the highest divine word to men (Gen. 15:1).

⁴⁷George Adam Smith, op. cit., pp. 140-141; for the opposite view, see Keil, op. cit., p. 183.

⁴⁸Charles Taylor, op. cit., p. 978.

⁴⁹Ibid.

The Intertestamental Period

One finds in this period many of the same themes already mentioned. Once again, we hear that God rewards men according to their works (Ecclesiasticus (200-180 B.C.) 16:14; 35:18-19), that the Lord brings recompense upon the godly man (Ecclesiasticus 12:2) and will not rest until He has executed His wrath upon the wicked (Ecclesiasticus 35:18-19). Material prosperity results from faithful obedience to God's laws (Ecclesiasticus 4:11-28; Tobit (200 B.C.) 4:5-19:21). The wise man is the prosperous man (Ecclesiasticus 4:11-16). In fact, the lover of wisdom is a lover of life itself (Ecclesiasticus 4:12). Even the pursuit of wisdom, let alone its possession, assures happiness (Wisdom (40 A.D.) 6:10-25). The saints wonder when they will be rewarded for their labors (2 Esdras (100 A.D.) 4:35), want to know why they, of all people, must suffer,⁵⁰ and express the opinion that such trials are really quite unjust since they place the saints on the same sinful level as the heathen about them.⁵¹ All this, of course, stems from the

⁵⁰2 Esdras 5:28-40. It is interesting to note that God replies to Esdras' question by asking if he can perform certain impossible feats (5:36-38). The answer is obvious. The Lord then indicates, that by the same token, Esdras could not understand why God deals in either judgment or love with His people even if it should be revealed to him.

⁵¹2 Esdras 3:31-34. This is undoubtedly the fact that God wants His people to realize when He sends them sorrow, He is telling them: "You are no better than the sinner about you, and this suffering proves it."

conviction that God is bound to bless those who obey Him.

The reward for alms-giving

In Tobit 12:7-10 we read that charity to the poor both rescues from death and cleanses the generous saint from sin. Life itself is the blessing bestowed upon the charitable and the righteous. Since both the righteous and the wicked alike possess animal life, it seems obvious that the life referred to in this passage must be a higher life, perhaps even a life after death.⁵² Certainly there can be no doubt that generous giving to the Lord brings with it rich reward of material bounty.⁵³

The question of faith as a reward

Is faith a reward for righteousness? In Wisdom 3:14 we read that a certain eunuch who had done no sin nor imagined any evil against the Lord received the "special gift" [*χάρις ἐκλεκτή*] of faith, together with "an inheritance in the temple of the Lord more acceptable to his mind." This is in direct contrast to Paul's words in Romans 3:20-22, where the apostle clearly states that faith

⁵² Compare also Baruch 4:1 where the writer asserts that those who keep God's laws will live while those who do not will die; also Ecclesiasticus 19:19, where it is stated that those who please God will "receive the fruit of the tree of immortality." See also Ecclesiasticus 17:22-23.

⁵³ Ecclesiasticus 35:10-11.

is our righteousness before God rather than the result of such holiness. Still, it ought to be noted that this "faith" in Wisdom 3:14 is called a *Χάρις*, a "grace," and in New Testament terms, this would be an undeserved gift.

Eschatological rewards

It is first in the Intertestamental period that one finds a heavy stress upon eschatological rewards. This is not to say that the other-worldly emphasis is wholly lacking until this time, as, for example, Isaiah 26:19, among other references, would testify. But it is chiefly in the Intertestamental period that the eschatological stress comes to the fore.

There are numerous passages which rival the New Testament for their eschatological content. Just before time's end there will be constant strife among men, God's Son will be revealed, and the wicked will be destroyed (2 Esdras 13:25-50). There will be a blast from the heavenly trumpet (2 Esdras 6:23), the dead will be raised (2 Esdras 7:30-32), and the living will be suddenly and miraculously transformed (2 Esdras 6:26). Books will be opened, which, apparently, contain a record of the deeds of men (2 Esdras 6:20). It will be a judgment according to works (2 Esdras 7:35). Righteousness brings eternal, undefiled rewards (Wisdom 1:15; 2:22-23). There is, however, one passage which seems to declare that it is a combination of faith

and works that saves from the destruction on judgment day (2 Esdras 9:7-8). In addition, it is recorded that only God's forgiving mercy spares man from the deserved punishments of hell (2 Esdras 7:46-70).

The eternal life and glory of the righteous are portrayed in such strikingly beautiful language that a few passages ought to be quoted here.

But the righteous live forever; their reward also is with the Lord, and the care of them is with the Most High. Therefore, shall they receive a glorious kingdom, and a beautiful crown from the Lord's hand; for with his right hand shall he cover them and with his arm shall he protect them (Wisdom 5:15-16).

For unto you is Paradise opened, the tree of life is planted, the time to come is prepared, plentiousness is made ready, a city is builded and rest is allowed, yea perfect goodness and wisdom. The root of evil is sealed up from you, weakness and moth is hid from you, and corruption is fled into hell to be forgotten. Sorrows are passed, and in the end is showed the treasure of immortality (2 Esdras 8:51-54).

These be they that have put off the mortal clothing and put on the immortal, and have confessed the name of God: Now they are crowned and receive palms (2 Esdras 2:45).

look for your Shepherd, he shall give you everlasting rest; for he is near at hand, that shall come at the end of the world. Be ready for the reward of the kingdom, for the everlasting light shall shine upon you for evermore. Flee the shadow of this world, receive the joyfulness of your glory: I testify my Savior openly (2 Esdras 2:34-36).

accused for the sake of holiness. And the kingdom, of course, brings with it both present and eternal blessings. The "pure in heart" shall have the beatific vision. The *Kataphorai* are probably people of whole-hearted devotion to God. The Septuagint frequently translates *ἡ γὰρ*, which has the

The New Testament

The Synoptics and Acts

"Be holy and be happy!"

Happiness depends on holiness. This is the point Jesus establishes in His Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5:1-16; Luke 6:20-26). The following facts should be observed: (1) These Beatitudes are not conditions for becoming Jesus' disciples; they are proclaiming the conduct of those who are already Christ's followers (Mt. 5:1). (2) To achieve this happiness of the Beatitudes, man must undergo a radical reversal in his thinking and conduct. For only the "poor in spirit, mourners, meek, hungry, thirsty, and persecuted" are happy. This is in direct contrast to the philosophy of the unconverted. Only those who reverse their thinking and living, those who repent, can find the happiness Jesus portrays in this sermon. (3) The holiness urged by Christ in these Beatitudes brings both temporal and eternal blessing. The "poor in spirit," the bankrupt beggars before God, those who look to Him for everything from food to forgiveness, will receive the "kingdom of heaven," as well as those who are persecuted for the sake of holiness. And the kingdom, of course, brings with it both present and eternal blessings. The "pure in heart" shall have the beatific vision. The *Katharoi* are probably people of whole-hearted devotion to God. The Septuagint frequently translates $\gamma \dot{\eta} \sigma \tau \upsilon$, which has the

meaning "unmixed, unalloyed," with *καθαρός*, as, for example, Psalm 51:12; Exodus 25:11. In James 4:8 the apostle commands the "double-minded" to "cleanse [καθαρίσεις] their hands and hearts." The "meek," those who refuse to criticize or rebel against the Lord for the way He governs their lives, but leave everything up to His guidance and direction,⁵⁴ will receive the earth for their inheritance. It is difficult to determine if this is a temporal or eternal inheritance. In Psalm 37:11 it is apparently temporal. Or is this the "new earth" of which the Scriptures sometimes speak?⁵⁵ Surely meek people do not inherit this present globe; the strong and selfish do.⁵⁶

The Savior concludes this famous Sermon as He begins, with this proposition: Follow My words on holiness and be happy; reject them and suffer. This, of course, is the whole point of Jesus' words on the two houses (Mt. 7:24-27; Luke 12:8). Unless one builds his life on a diligent observance of the commands Christ has set down in this mountain sermon he cannot hope to have happiness. The life that endures and is blessed by God comes only to him who

⁵⁴Ps. 37:1-11.

⁵⁵Is. 66:22; 2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1.

⁵⁶Luther feels that the "earth" here refers to temporal possessions. See Martin Luther, "The Sermon on the Mount," Luther's Works, edited by Jaroslav Pelikan, translated from the German by Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), XXI, 22ff.

hears and obeys the Savior's words. The man who hears only, cultivates and invites his own destruction.

"You get what you give!"

Among others, there are two passages which indicate this (Luke 6:38; Mark 4:24-25). The parallel to the Mark reference is Matthew 13:11-13. The disciples have just asked our Lord why He is in the habit of addressing the crowds in parables. His reply is: "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given." Then follow those puzzling words about giving more to the man who has, and taking away from the man who has not. Thus our Lord makes plain that man can take no credit for the "more" that is "given him" as a reward for "that which he has." For "what he has" in the first place, his knowledge of the kingdom's secrets, is strictly a gift of divine grace.

Rewards for discipleship

What wonderful rewards Christ holds out to those who meet the stern, hard life of discipleship (Mt. 19:28-29; Mark 10:28-31; Luke 18:28-30). Thrones in the new world, new brothers, sisters, fathers and children--a reference perhaps to the new relationships formed in the Christian community, a hundred-fold blessing in this life, and eternal life in the age to come--these are the rewards offered

to those who are strong enough to bear the cross and deny themselves in a faithful following of Jesus. It should be noted, however, that a part of this temporal reward consists of persecutions (Mark 10:31). This, of course, is in keeping with Christ's remark about the "happy" persecuted (Mt. 5:11-12).

On a number of occasions our Lord made it perfectly plain that His disciples must be willing to stand up for Him before men if they expect Him to stand up before the Father in heaven (Mt. 10:32-33; Luke 12:8). In fact, denial of Christ now not only brings about His present denial of us before His heavenly Father; in addition, this cowardly refusal to be counted with and for Jesus now will cause the Savior to deny His deniers on the day of His return (Mark 8:38).

The reward of mercy

The reward of mercy and pardon to the brother is divine mercy and forgiveness. The surest, quickest way to damn one's self is to judge and condemn others (Mt. 7:1-5). This is what we might call "proportionate judgment." Actually, this is a judgment based upon a man's attitude or faith. He who counts on God's mercy will receive just that from the Lord on the last day. He who holds God to judge him by his deserts will get a judgment of righteousness. He will be judged according to the letter of the law and found

wanting. He who judges himself in need of God's mercy will be forgiven and unexpectedly rewarded. He who thinks he does not need God's pardon because he is complacently satisfied with his life will not get forgiveness in the final judgment. He will fail to find the forgiveness he spurned. He who is merciful to his brother's faults will get that same mercy from God for his own.⁵⁷

This mercy must especially be shown towards one's enemies if one wants to be called a true son of God (Mt. 5: 44-45), and to receive from Him a great reward (Luke 6:35). This reward is not specifically spelled out. It might be the sonship with God mentioned in the last part of the verse. Then again, it might be the reception of mercy from the Lord on the day of judgment by those who have been merciful (Mt. 5:7). If that be the case, then the gracious emphasis becomes apparent. For no matter how much mercy the merciful have dispensed during their earthly lives, it is still mercy, gracious love, and not a merited reward that they receive from the hands of Jesus on the day of reckoning.⁵⁸

One must pardon to be pardoned (Mt. 6:14-15; Mark 11: 25-26). In fact, we can pray God's pardon down upon us,

⁵⁷On this point of proportionate judgment, see Ulrich S. Leupold, "Proportionate Judgment," The Lutheran World Review, I (April, 1949), 28-38.

⁵⁸Cf. G. W. Stewart, "The Place of Rewards in the Teaching of Christ," The Expositor, X (1910), 239.

only as we indicate that we have already forgiven our brother (Mt. 6:12). Do these words imply that God's pardon to us is conditioned by our forgiveness of others? It would almost seem so, particularly when one calls to mind our Lord's words in Luke 7:47: "Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much." Obviously, this passage has occasioned difficulty since earliest times. That is seen by the fact that a number of manuscripts and textual authorities omit the phrase *ὅτι ἡ ἀγάπη ἐν πολὺν. ὡς δὲ ὀλίγον ἀφίεται ὀλίγον ἀγαπᾷ.* If these words are a part of the original text, and the best textual evidence seems to support this, then our Lord does seem to indicate that divine forgiveness is in direct proportion to our love for the brother.

We must not, however, disregard several important facts. (1) The Scriptures elsewhere indicate that Christ's blood, and not our love or pardon of others, is responsible for our cleansing from sin. We think, for example, of 1 John 1:7, yet, even here, our pardon is closely linked to our walking in the light and practice of fellowship with the brother. Yet the statement of Psalm 130:4 must also be remembered: fear of God, living the holy life, is the fruit of forgiveness, not its cause. (2) It should also be noted that in Luke 7:50 Jesus makes it plain that faith saved this woman who anointed our Lord. Perhaps this "salvation" of verse 50 is to be equated with the "forgiveness" of verse 47.

If so, then faith gained her forgiveness, not her love.

The reward of unheralded religious practice

There are rewards for those who do, and for those who do not, parade their religion (Mt. 6:1-18). Those who "sound the trumpet before them" in their religious acts have all the reward they are going to receive in the praise and recognition of men; they will get no additional reward from God.⁵⁹ On the other hand, saints who practice their piety in secret will be rewarded by the Lord, perhaps with that heavenly treasure the righteous are storing up for themselves by their wise management of earthly possessions (Mt. 6:20). Will this be an open reward? It would seem so, especially in the light of Luke 14:14, where we read that those who are kind to people who cannot return the favor will receive their reward "at the resurrection of the just." This would imply a universally public reward. On the other hand, if one omits the phrase *ἐν τῷ ᾧ ἀνέρω* at the conclusion of Matthew 6:4, and this seems warranted from the evidence of the best manuscripts, then the translation of the last part of this verse might run like this: ". . . and your Father who sees, in secret will reward you." That is, as

⁵⁹See Alfred Plummer, An Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Matthew (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1953), p. 91.

Plummer puts it: ". . . thy reward will be as unknown to the world as thy benevolence."⁶⁰

The reward for kindness to prophets

There is also a reward for receiving prophets (Mt. 10: 41-42). Those who practice kindness and hospitality toward Christ's prophets and heralds because of their sacred character will one day have a share in the rewards given to the prophets themselves. "Or again, to support the missionaries with sympathy, prayer, and alms, is to enter into their labors and share their reward."⁶¹

The eschatological rewards

The following points should be noted. Christ will return with the angels in great power and glory (Mt. 24:30). The dead will be raised (Mt. 22:23-32). Jesus will judge all nations (Mt. 25:31-46). This judgment will be on the basis of works. The stress will be placed on the charity and mercy man has extended toward his fellow saints and men (Mt. 25:31-46), upon whole-hearted faithfulness to Christ (Luke 16:9-13), upon a wise management of one's body and goods, a management which includes the accumulation of "additional funds" for the Master (Mt. 25:14-30), upon a life

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 92.

⁶¹Ibid., pp. 157-158.

of "fasting," learning to do without all the material luxuries of life, thus building for oneself a big heavenly bank account (Mt. 6:16-21), upon control of one's tongue (Mt. 12:36-37), upon a rigorous self-discipline, a stern self-sacrifice which goes all out to avoid causing oneself or others to stumble in sin or hurting people in any way (Mt. 18:7-10), upon giving to the poor (Luke 18:22), upon a faithful performance of God's will (Mt. 7:21-23). In at least five passages Jesus makes it unmistakably evident that entrance into eternal life depends upon man's righteousness (Mt. 5:19-20; 19:17; Mark 10:17-22; Luke 10:25-28; 18:18-22). In the light of these facts, is it strange that our Lord indicates that the way is hard and the gate is narrow that lead to life, and few find that way and gate, while the reverse is true about the path and entrance to destruction (Mt. 7:13-14)? Following the judgment, the righteous will enter the joys of eternal life (Mt. 25:34,46), while the wicked will depart into eternal torment (Luke 12:47). This punishment will consist of death by the sword (Luke 12:46), a severe beating (Luke 12:47), banishment from the Lord into everlasting fire (Mt. 25:41) and darkness where there will be eternal tears and teeth-grinding (Mt. 22:13). This punishment will be commensurate with the conduct one pursued in accordance with the knowledge at his disposal (Luke 12:47-48). In other words, there will be degrees of punishment. The destruction in hell will be complete

(Mt. 10:28), and once the eternal verdict has been rendered, it cannot be reversed.

The Pauline Corpus

There is perhaps no more fitting introduction to this section than the apostle's admonition to the Philippian saints: "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:12-13). These words most adequately express the double theme of the Scriptures: sweat and struggle to lead a virtuous life, for your temporal and eternal happiness depend upon your saintliness, and then recognize that God is completely responsible for everything, including even your will to be holy, let alone the holy deed itself.

Paul's use of reward

St. Paul speaks of a compensation for both the righteous and for the wicked. He speaks of life as a sowing and a harvest in which one reaps either life or death (Gal. 6:7f.). He pictures life as a race in which one runs hard for the prize (1 Cor. 9:24-27). The rich are commanded not to rely on their vapor-like wealth, rather, they should strive to become rich in good works and thereby build up a solid foundation for the "time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life" (1 Tim. 6:17-19). It makes no

difference if a man be slave or free, he will be requited by the Lord for every good deed he performs (Eph. 6:8). If a man's good work can endure the purging fire of the last day, he will receive a reward.⁶² Timothy is warned to keep a close watch on himself and his teaching and to abide in it. For in doing this he will bring salvation both to himself and to his hearers (1 Tim. 4:16). Man's eternal fate hinges upon his faithful performance of good deeds (Rom. 2:5-7; 2:13; 2 Cor. 5:10).⁶³ Preisker's explanation for this work-righteous emphasis in Paul is this: It is a remnant of his Pharisaical background.⁶⁴

The contrast

Yet, there is a notable difference. For no matter how Jewish this all sounds, judgment day for Paul is the day toward which he looks with rejoicing, a day on which Christ's glory will be revealed and He will be finally and forever victorious over all the powers of darkness, a day on which

⁶²1 Cor. 3:13-15. The point seems to be this: on the final day, everyone's deeds will be revealed (1 Cor. 4:5). If this revelation indicates that a man's works were truly good, he will be rewarded.

⁶³Other reward references are: 2 Cor. 5:9; Phil. 1:10; 2 Cor. 4:17; Rom. 8:17f.; 1 Thess. 1:10; 3:13; 5:23; 2 Cor. 11:16ff.

⁶⁴Herbert Preisker, "416 uo's," Theologisches Woerterbuch zum Neuen Testament, edited by Gerhard Kittel (Stuttgart: Verlag von W. Kohlhammer, 1938), IV, 726.

hope will become a blessed reality for all the faithful, a day on which the righteous will enter and remain with Christ in God's kingdom. It is not, like with the Jews, a day of fear; rather, it is a day of joy, a day of long awaited salvation toward which one looks not with trembling but with boldness. Such confidence is possible only because the Jewish thought of reward as a meritorious achievement, a thought which carries with it much uncertainty for man in his relationship to the holy God, is completely set aside. As Preisker puts it: "Mit der Rechtfertigungslehre ist der Lohngedanke ueberwunden."⁶⁵ Again:

Gibt es Rechtfertigung nur fuer den Glauben, und ist der Glaubende ein solcher, der der Heilstat Gottes Raum gibt . . . ja ist der Glaube selbst nichts anderes als Geschenk Gottes, so ist jeder Gedanke an ein Verdienst ausgeschlossen und Lohn einfach unmoeglich.⁶⁶

The Johannine Corpus

To the victor belong the spoils. This is the theme stressed again and again in Revelation. Only those who overcome receive the victory of eternal life.⁶⁷ Only those who battle valiantly against the devil and sin will be crowned with glory. Yet, in a sense, the victory already has been won. For the saints have defeated Satan "by the

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷Rev. 2:17; 2:10-11; 2:25-28; 3:5; 3:11-12; 3:21; 21:7.

blood of the Lamb" (Rev. 12:11). One will be judged on the basis of his works (Rev. 20:12-13; 22:12). In the same vein, we hear that only those who abide to the letter by the words recorded in Revelation will abide in God's love. For if any one is bold enough to add anything to the book God will send down upon him the plagues described in the prophecy. And if any one dares to excise any words from the book, God will excise his name from the book of life (Rev. 22:18-19). Summing it up, one might say that only he who "does the will of God abides forever" (1 John 2:7). And that divine will is described as faith in Christ and love for the brother (1 John 3:23). Perhaps it is obedience to these twin commands of faith and love that John has in mind when in 2 John 8 he admonishes his readers to watch themselves, lest they lose those things for which they have worked and thus forfeit their reward. Faith in Christ is the greatest "work" of all (John 6:28-29).

The Petrine Corpus

There are just two passages that deserve mention here. In 1 Peter 4:5 the implication is that the wicked will be judged on the basis of their works, and in 1 Peter 3:9-12 the apostle states that Christians have been called by God in order that they may secure a blessing. Then, quoting Psalm 34:12-16, Peter indicates that both the length and happiness of one's life depend upon control of the tongue

and avoidance of evil.

Others

How strongly St. James warns against a merciless judgment of the brother! For he who is guilty of this will one day receive the same merciless judgment from the Lord.⁶⁸ To escape condemnatory judgment on the last day, one must refrain from quarreling with the brother. Obedience to this command is all the more vital because the Judge is already at the door (James 5:9). In James 5:20 the apostle informs us that the person who restores a sinner from his evil way will "save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins." Does the "his" here refer to the person saving or the person saved? If it is the former, then salvation is a matter of saving others.⁶⁹ Does this passage also imply that forgiveness is dependent upon such concern for the erring brother? Certainly, Peter suggests this when he writes that "love shall cover a multitude of sins" (1 Pet. 4:8). In James 1:12 we are told that the Lord will give the "crown of life" to "those that love him." This, of course, echoes Jesus' description of the final judgment in

⁶⁸James 2:13. These words are a strong echo of Matthew 5:7. In fact, even a quick and casual reading of this letter will reveal numerous parallels between the thought world of James and Jesus.

⁶⁹Ezk. 3:17-21.

which heaven is given to those who have loved Christ in the brother about them. The same thought seems to be expressed in Hebrews 6:10 where we read that God will not forget works of love that have been performed toward His name. Finally, in Hebrews 10:35 the admonition is given to the readers not to cast away their confidence which brings with it a great reward. In the context of the letter this reward would be the heavenly rest (4:9ff.), or perhaps the city with foundations, whose builder and maker is God (11:10), or perhaps Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem with all its beauty and joy (12:22-24). At any rate, it is faith that gains this reward, yet, a faith that is active in faithfulness to the Lord (chapter 11).

Conclusion and Summary

A Summary of the Synoptics

Perhaps a few summary statements are in order. The word *μεινός* is found some twelve times in the Synoptics and, significantly enough, always on the lips of Jesus.⁷⁰ In His use of the term Jesus differs from the Old Testament and His contemporaries who conceived of a primarily earthly recompense. For Christ, reward is

⁷⁰See W. Pesch, "Der Lohngedanke in der Lehre Jesu," Muenchener Theologische Studien, I. Historische Abteilung, 7. Band (1955), 1.

associated for the most part with the eschatological kingdom of God.⁷¹ It has a certain paradoxical quality; for it is given not to those blessed by the world, but to those hated and hounded by men. It is withheld from those who seek a reward before men. It is given to those who love their enemies, and to those who receive with respect and kindness a prophet and disciple of Jesus.⁷² The biggest reward of all is divine fellowship.⁷³ Our Lord's purpose in so frequently speaking of rewards is to underscore the fact that man stands constantly and completely beneath the searching eye of the holy God to whom he owes unquestioned and perfect obedience.⁷⁴ In addition, Jesus desires to impress upon us that God's dealings with the children of men are not whimsical and arbitrary.

For the essential meaning of *melbros* is not an arbitrary gift, to be bestowed or withheld at the choice of the giver, but dues paid for work; wages, hire--that which has been earned, and cannot be denied without injustice. Jesus was ever eager to rid his hearers of a false idea--an idea which had clouded the religion of

⁷¹For the opposite view, see *ibid.*, pp. 7-8. Although Pesch maintains Jesus stands completely in the tradition of His people and His time in His teaching on reward, he asserts that this dependence does not deprive Christ of the purity of His own teaching.

⁷²These are the summary statements of Preisker, *op. cit.*, pp. 702-704. For a similar summary, see C. J. Cadoux, *The Historic Mission of Jesus* (New York: Harper and Brothers, n.d.), pp. 209-211.

⁷³See Pesch, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

⁷⁴Preisker, *op. cit.*, p. 725.

Israel and survives even yet among many Christians. This error was to suppose God's dealings with mankind to be arbitrary and capricious, exempt from law, so that none could predict them, each decision springing separately, as it were, from the Divine will. . . . For the acts of God, Christ taught, are neither arbitrary or uncontrolled. They are subject to law--law not less inexorable because of God's own devising. . . .

This truth illumines the doctrine of reward. . . .⁷⁵

One certainly cannot press this point too far, as the teaching of Matthew 20:1-16 so clearly shows.⁷⁶ In the final analysis, the reward that Jesus promises is, in many instances, the kingdom of God itself.⁷⁷

Generally speaking, our Lord's sayings on punishment correspond directly to His teachings on reward. There is no reward for those who love only their friends and lovers. There is no reward for those who practice their religion to receive the praise of men. The proud will be humbled; woes will one day descend upon the fortunate; condemnation is promised against those who speak idly. Those who refuse to forgive and practice love and mercy, those who are unfaithful, inefficient and unproductive will also receive their

⁷⁵Anthony C. Deane, "The Christian Doctrine of Reward," The Expositor, Series 8, XVIII, No. 6 (December, 1919), 414-415.

⁷⁶This parable will be given fuller treatment in the next chapter.

⁷⁷See Otto Kirn, "Lohn," Realencyklopaedia fuer Protestantische Theologie und Kirche, edited by Albert Hauck (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1902), XI, 608.

due punishment.⁷⁸ With Jesus, this divine retribution is chiefly eschatological.⁷⁹ The punishment theme is especially expressed in the parables. It will consist of fiery torment (Luke 16:23), exclusion from the divine gifts and rewards (Luke 19:24), a severe beating (Luke 12:47), and death (Luke 19:27). The offenses that bring about God's punishment are as follows: (1) a knowledge of the divine will yet a refusal to perform it (Luke 12:47); (2) disobedience and unfaithfulness (Mt. 24:48f.); (3) opposition and enmity toward the true God (Luke 19:14); (4) self-seeking, the quest for honor (Luke 11:43); (5) mistreatment of fellowmen (Luke 11:42,52); (6) exaltation of self and honor seeking before others (Luke 14:7ff.); (7) expectation of reward and praise from others (Luke 14:12ff.); (8) enmity against Christ (Mt. 23:13,37; Mark 12:1ff.).⁸⁰ In all cases, the punishment is earned, but not the reward. It stems from God's goodness, and not man's good works.⁸¹

The Relationship between Faith and Works

Finally reference needs to be made to the relationship between faith and works. We observe the problem particularly

⁷⁸Cadoux, op. cit., pp. 211-214.

⁷⁹See Pesch, op. cit., p. 51.

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 52.

⁸¹Ibid. See Romans 7:23. Sin pays wages; God gives eternal life.

in Paul. On the one hand, he can say that men will be judged and justified by their works (Rom. 2:5-7; 2:13; 2 Cor. 5:10), and, on the other hand, he can assert with equal emphasis that salvation is completely a matter of grace and faith (Eph. 1:2-9). Weiss maintains that Paul's statements on judgment according to works are not to be viewed "in the rigid judicial sense as an external balancing of wages and service, but as the natural correspondence of harvest and seed-time (Gal. vi.7,8)."⁸² This still does not do away with the fact that the harvest, the reward, depends upon man's sowing, his doing. Perhaps the Biblical reconciliation between these two teachings lies in James' words that good works are to faith what breath is to the body (James 2:26). Our righteous deeds are the breath that must constantly come from the body of our faith or the body is dead. Therefore, to assert that salvation is by faith is also to say that it is by works. It is impossible to state one without the other. Faith and works are the "Siamese Twins" of Christianity that cannot be separated or both die. It is never a case of works following faith. Rather it is always a case of faith and works together, even as it is a case of the body and breath together. In a certain sense, the statement is correct: "everlasting

⁸²Bernard Weiss, Biblical Theology of the New Testament, translated from the German by David Eaton (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, n.d.), II, 67.

life is both a grace and a reward."⁸³ Hebrews 11 immediately comes to mind, where faith is portrayed not simply as trust in Christ, but rather as valiant faithfulness to Him. For that is what faith always is: a reliance on the Lord, plus obedience to Him. That is why Paul calls faith "obedience" in Romans 1:5.

The Parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard

(Matthew 20:1-16)

Viewed from one standpoint, this parable is a graphic presentation of the theological outlook of many a Jew at Christ's time. And certainly Simon Peter is a good representative of that outlook (Mt. 19:27). The fulfillment of the divine law was regarded as a service which placed God in debt to man, obligated the Lord to grant man material blessing for such service.⁸⁴ As was the service, so was the reward in keeping with it. It was for this reason that the first persons hired by the householder in the parable felt they had a legitimate complaint against their employer. He had given some of their fellow laborers more than their

⁸³J. Pohle, "Merit," The Catholic Encyclopedia, edited by Charles G. Herbermann and Others (New York: Robert Appleton Co., 1911), X, 204.

⁸⁴For Rabbinic documentation of this fact, see Herman Strack and Paul Billerbeck, Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch (Muenchen: C. N. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1928), IV, No. 1, 49c ff.

due. This could not be; for you get precisely what you earn and deserve from both men and God.

Diese offizielle Lohnlehre der alten Synagoge laesst natuerlich keinen Raum fuer einen Gnadenlohn. Gott u. Mensch stehen hier als zwei gleichberechtigte Parteien nebeneinander; der Mensch praesentiert seine verdienstliche Leistung, u. Gott erkennt sie an u. zahlt den Lohn.⁸⁵

This thinking colored all Israel's religion and relationship with the Lord.⁸⁶

There is abundant evidence, then, that both the Old and the New Testament Scriptures speak of a reward of God to man. One might also mention that this reward is in keeping with the deed done. There are degrees of reward. Wise men shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who cause many to walk God's paths like the stars forever and ever (Dan. 12:3). The cities of Capernaum and Bethsaida will receive a more severe punishment than Tyre, Sidon, Sodom and Gomorrah (Mt. 11:20ff.). He who relaxes even the least of the divine commands will be least in the kingdom, while he who faithfully performs and teaches them will be great (Mt. 5:19). Peter and the other disciples are promised that they will "sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Mt. 19:28). This is the reward they will obtain in the world to come for their sacrifices of discipleship.

⁸⁵Ibid., pp. 491-492.

⁸⁶Ibid., p. 495.

CHAPTER III

THE SCRIPTURAL EVIDENCE (A SYSTEMATIC APPROACH)

There Can Be No Merited Reward Because of the Nature of God

God is Absolutely Sovereign and Independent

No matter what man does or refrains from doing, he does not have a claim upon his Creator. That fact is most forcefully brought out in Job 38-42:6. In these chapters it is made painfully and unmistakably clear that man is so puny, so microscopically small in comparison with the eternal, almighty God that any contending with the Lord is laughable and ridiculous. Obviously, amoebae are not in a position to level accusations against men. Neither are amoebic men in a position to charge the Almighty with unfairness, no matter what His dealings with them. The only choice before God is to despise oneself and repent in dust and ashes (42:6). For:

Never, however, does the faithful performance of duty confer a right to demand reward from God. The Creator is far too exalted above the creature; the creature owes everything to Him and can only strike his breast confessing his unworthiness.¹

¹Paul Heinisch, Theology of the Old Testament, English edition by William Heidt (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, n.d.), p. 203; see also Guenther Bornkamm, "Der Lohngedanke im Neuen Testament," Evangelische Theologie, Heft 2/3 (1946), pp. 149-150.

Even the Roman Church, with its strong emphasis upon merit admits to the fact that man has no real claim upon God. Merit before God cannot be the

basis of a real title for a Divine reward either in the natural or in the supernatural order. The simple reason is that God, being self-existent, absolutely independent, and sovereign, can be in no respect bound in justice with regard to his creatures. Properly speaking, man possesses nothing of his own; all that he has and all that he does is a gift of God, and, since God is infinitely self-sufficient, there is no advantage or benefit which man can by his services confer upon Him. Hence, on the part of God, there can only be question of a gratuitous promise of reward for certain good works. For such works He owes the promised reward, not in justice or equity, but solely because He has freely bound himself, i.e., because of His own attributes of veracity and fidelity.²

In a sense, these words are a contradiction. First it is said God is not bound to His creatures; then, it is said that He is. Yet, does God owe man the blessing simply because He has promised it? The lives of Joseph and Job, among others, would seem to say no. Our Lord's second wilderness temptation is also pertinent here. Satan was evidently attempting to convince Christ that since God had promised His protection, man had the right to demand it (Mt. 4:6ff.). Jesus' answer indicates that this is not the case (Mt. 6:7). The Savior quotes a portion of Deuteronomy 6:16, thus making it plain that He regards His temptation as similar to Israel's at Massah. In that desert place the

²J. Pohle, "Merit," The Catholic Encyclopedia, edited by Charles G. Herbermann and Others (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911), X, 203.

Hebrews challenged God to prove His presence among them by supplying water upon demand. Thus they tempted the Lord, put Him to the proof by insisting that He keep His word to care for them. This was their temptation, and this was also Christ's temptation in the wilderness. Jesus' answer, "You shall not tempt the Lord your God," shows that such human demands upon divine promises are completely out of the question.

God is a Gracious Elector and Covenant-Maker

God has no debt to man, for it is God who elected man and made a covenant with him (Ex. 6:7; 34:6). Certainly, there can be no legitimate thought of merited reward when one bears in mind that man's obedience is only a response to God's revelation of Himself. This revelation calls for a decision on man's part, yet not a decision based on man's free choice.

God confronts man with the unequivocal demand that he should recognize and endorse the prior decision which God has already made concerning him by electing man to belong to himself.³

God's election of His Old Testament people absolutely excludes all thought of merit. That is clearly shown by the pictures employed to describe this election. God's election of Israel is likened to a marriage. Jahweh has chosen

³Emil Brunner, Eternal Hope, translated from the German by Harold Knight (London: Lutterworth Press, 1954), pp. 178-179.

Israel like a husband a wife. The wife owes the husband complete submission and faithfulness.

Her infidelity would be a refusal to acknowledge the grace of election. . . . Marriage is in effect an election before being a covenant, and that much more, since Israelite law gave to the husband the right to repudiate his wife.⁴

God's election of Israel is compared to a father-son relationship; God is the Potter, Israel the clay; God is the Vinedresser, Israel the vine; God is the Shepherd, Israel the sheep. All of these metaphors underscore the gracious aspect of God's election and care of His people.

There is perhaps one passage which breathes a hint that Israel had some attraction for God, and that is Hosea 9:10. Here the prophet likens God to a desert traveler pleasantly surprised upon finding a bunch of grapes in the barren wilderness. This could mean, however, that the impossible has come true. As impossible as it is to find luscious grapes in the desert, so inconceivable is it that Jahweh has chosen Israel.⁵ For the clear teaching of Ezekiel 16 is that Israel was utterly repulsive. Yet God chose and wed her out of His great pity and love. The gracious aspect becomes all the more evident when one recalls that Hosea's marriage to the prostitute Gomer became

⁴Edmund Jacob, Theology of the Old Testament, translated from the German by Arthur Heathcote and Philip Allcock (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1958), p. 202.

⁵Ibid., p. 110.

a living symbol of God's marriage to prostitute Israel. And certainly prostitutes do not deserve to be loved by their husbands.⁶

This divine election of Israel bestowed upon the people both temporal and eternal blessings. Neither are the result of merit. Moore comments:

It should be remembered, further, that "a lot in the World to Come," which is the nearest approximation in rabbinical Judaism to the Pauline and Christian idea of salvation, or eternal life, is ultimately assured to every Israelite on the ground of the original election of the people by the free grace of God, prompted not by its merits, collective or individual, but solely by God's love (Deut. 7:6-11). . . .⁷

The point is this. God is an electing God. His election, however, is not arbitrary. He did not close His eyes and choose at random. He purposely put His hand on weak, helpless and despised Israel. Only thus could He reveal Himself. Only thus could He manifest His essential nature of mercy in its clearest colors. Viewed in this light Israel's election by God becomes a startling divine self-manifestation. Israel's election is a true revelation of God's character--the gracious God. This is true of the election in both testaments.⁸

⁶Cf. Otto Procksch, Theologie des Alten Testaments (Guetersloh: C. Bertelsmann Verlag, n.d.), pp. 618-619.

⁷George F. Moore, Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era--The Age of the Tannaim (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927), II, 94-95.

⁸Cf. H. H. Rowley, The Faith of Israel (London: SCM Press LTD, 1956), p. 69.

God Himself is Man's Highest Reward

This is what God tells Abraham (Gen. 15:1). The context of Genesis 15 seems to indicate that Abraham's fear stemmed from his continued childlessness despite God's promise that he would be the progenitor of a mighty nation. God's assuring words would then have this possible meaning:

Fear not, Abraham. Even though you have no children, even though you had nothing, I would be your defender and reward, your wealth, your profit. Childless though you are, can you imagine a treasure richer than the possession of the Almighty? Still, if this is not a sufficient blessing I again vow that I will fulfill my former promise to you and make you the father of a great people.

There are, of course, a number of problems in this passage. How shall we translate the Hebrew? Shall we go along with the Septuagint and, for example, the Revised Standard Version, and render the final portion of the verse: "and your reward is very great"? Or shall we translate with the King James Version: "and your exceeding great reward"? The Hebrew allows either possibility. If God here promises no less than Himself as Abraham's reward, then the point becomes clear. Abraham was perhaps upset about the fact that he had been working hard for God, was diligently obeying the Lord's commands, and still he did not receive his deserved wages, namely, the fulfillment of the Lord's promise of a son. Therefore, God assures Abraham that even if he does not receive that earned "salary," that coveted reward, he still has another and greater one--the Lord Himself. God

Himself would be Abraham's "salary" for his faithful service of obedience.⁹ Even if he possessed nothing else, Abraham would still be the richest of men. Might not this be the answer God gives today to those saints who approach Him demanding material blessing for their faithfulness: "You already have the greatest and highest reward for your righteousness. You have Me." And clearly, this reward of God Himself can under no stretch of the imagination be merited.

God is Man's Loving Father, Full of
Grace and Goodness

It is utterly impossible to think or speak of an earned reward when one recalls that God's relationship with man is that of a gracious and loving Father to his son. It is as a Father that God gives His kingdom to men (Luke 12:32). It is the Father alone who gives; children can only receive. Gifts travel in only one direction--from heaven to earth, and never the other way around (James 1:17). Whatever man is or does is completely the result of a loving Father's grace and goodness. As Preisker puts it:

Was menschliche Ueberheblichkeit als Erfolg und Ertrag, als Anrecht oder Verdienst eigenen Tuns ansieht, ist fuer Jesus nichts anderes als Gottes Lohn. Freilich

⁹This is also our Lord's teaching. See W. Pesch, "Der Lohngedanke in der Lehre Jesu," Muenchener Theologische Studien, I. Historische Abteilung, 7. Band (1955), 124.

ist es Jesu freudige Botschaft, dass Gott Lohn nicht gibt als gerecht urteilender Richter, sondern als guetig beschenkender Vater Mt. 6,1.4.18; 25,34.¹⁰

God Alone is Good

Man's insistence upon a divine reward for services rendered is often based upon the assumption that what has been done is good and deserving. Yet such thinking is rather difficult to hold in the light of our Lord's words on God's unique goodness (Mark 10:18; Mt. 19:17; Luke 18:18). If God alone is good, how can man ever lay claim to a reward from the Lord as just payment for righteousness rendered?¹¹

God is the Eternal Judge to Whom

Man is Absolutely Accountable

This is basic. God can never be man's debtor, can never be responsible to him for anything. For He is man's Judge. It is never the other way around. Man is absolutely accountable to his Maker for every thought, word and act. Under such circumstances it is fantastic for man to demand anything from God. For the only choice of a guilty and condemned criminal before the judge is to plead for mercy.

¹⁰Herbert Preisker, "*Mit 160's*," Theologisches Woerterbuch zum Neuen Testament, edited by Gerhard Kittel (Stuttgart: Verlag von W. Kohlhammer, 1938), IV, 722.

¹¹Ibid., p. 724.

That is man's only alternative before his divine Judge. It is utterly false and fool-hardy for man to talk of a deed that is good in itself and that obligates God. The fact of divine judgment precludes any such possibility.

Bornkamm comments:

Hier [in the fact of divine judgment] ist nun allerdings mit Nachdruck zu sagen, dass das N.T. die Idee der guten Tat, die ihren Wert in sich selbst traegt, nicht kennt. Warum nicht? Einfach darum, weil Gott ist, und sein richterliches Amt keinen andern abtritt. Die Wirklichkeit Gottes, die Realitat des kommenden Gerichtes laesst keinen Raum fuer ein Gutsein das in sich und an sich gut ist, fuer ein Handeln, das in sich selbst zum Ziel kommt.¹²

God is the Doer of His Own Will in Christ

It is perfectly true that our Lord once said that only those who perform His Father's will can enter the Father's kingdom (Mt. 7:21). At first glance it would seem these words indicate that doers of righteousness are rewarded with the blessing of the kingdom. Yet, the same Lord who spoke these words also said: "For this is the will of my Father, that every one who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6:40). It is the work of faith that man must do to perform the Father's will (John 6:28-29). And faith is never a doing, but a receiving of what God has done. In addition, one must remember that Christ's mission was the

¹²Bornkamm, op. cit., p. 147.

doing of His Father's will (John 6:38). Since Christ and the Father are one (John 10:30), it is legitimate to say that God is the doer of His own will in Christ. If Jesus is the personification of the divine will man certainly can take no credit or demand rewards for his faulty, imperfect performance of that will.¹³

God is Man's Gracious Justifier

The fact that God promises man a reward for faithfulness to the divine laws can never becloud the fact that God is first man's gracious Justifier before He is the Rewarder of man's deeds. Every reward is a reward of grace because it follows God's prior undeserved pardon to the sinner. Man's response to this grace is thankful service in God's kingdom. Viewed in the light of God's gracious justification of the sinner, man's righteousness is essentially the thankful response to a "reward" already given by God, the "reward" of pardon and eternal life, rather than a service for a future reward. Thus, the reward is never of debt, but of grace which God in His faithfulness and justice lovingly gives to those who work for Him.¹⁴

¹³Pesch, op. cit., p. 143.

¹⁴See Herman Strack and Paul Billerbeck, Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch (Muenchen: C. N. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1928), IV, 485-486; also, R. Bultmann, Theology of the New Testament, translated from the German by Kendrick Grobel (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), I, 279-292.

There Can Be No Merited Reward Because
of the Nature of Man

Man is God's Slave

This is a clear and unmistakable teaching of Scripture. And man has no choice in the matter; he is obligated to work for God. Perhaps this is the stress of the householder's question to some potential vineyard workers: "Why are you standing here all the day idle?" This may point to the fact that everyone without exception is obligated to a cooperative effort in God's kingdom.¹⁵ Yet, not only is man bound to work for the Lord; his service is so great that he can never completely fulfill it.¹⁶ Whatever good he does is only the result of the faith which God has given him (John 15:5; Heb. 11:6; Eph. 2:10; 1 Cor. 6:19; Phil. 2:13; 2 Cor. 3:5). The Christian's good works are only God working in him (Phil. 2:13). In the words of Franz Pieper:

Freilich er, der Christ, tut die Werke. Aber er tut sie nicht aus seiner natuerlichen Art. Gott ist es, der mit seiner goettlichen Gnade und Kraft die Werke in ihm und durch ihn wirkt. Was aus seiner eigenen natuerlichen Art stammt, ist nur Hinderung und Befleckung der Werke. Wenn Gott dennoch die Werke belohnt so kroent er damit sein eignes Werk in Christen. . . .¹⁷

¹⁵See Strack-Billerbeck, op. cit., p. 485; also Pesch, op. cit., p. 51.

¹⁶Strack-Billerbeck, op. cit., p. 485.

¹⁷Franz Pieper, Christliche Dogmatik (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1920), III, 66.

Even the best of the saint's efforts are still tainted with sin.¹⁸ Therefore, no matter how faithful man may be, he is still an unprofitable slave before God (Luke 17:7-10).¹⁹

Certainly, it is in this frequent Biblical stress upon the Master-slave relationship that exists between God and man that we have one of our most compelling reasons for excluding all thought of merited reward. It is surely the slave alone who is in debt; for he owes his master everything. Even work-righteous Jews were willing to admit that.²⁰ Man has absolutely no freedom toward God. He is completely accountable to God for his life (Mt. 25:14-30). "He may not, must not, cannot raise any claim before God, but is like the slave who only has his duty to do and can do no more (Lk. 17:7-10)."²¹ Wherever the idea of reward appears it must be viewed against the background of this Master-slave relationship. The slave belongs to his master body and life and is absolutely answerable to him. It is never the reverse. Therefore, "Im strengen Sinn ist also das Verhaeltnis von Herrn und Sklaven kein Lohnverhaeltnis."²²

¹⁸See Pesch, op. cit., pp. 112, 126, 142-143.

¹⁹See Preisker, op. cit., pp. 723-724.

²⁰Strack-Billerbeck, op. cit., p. 488, footnote a.

²¹Bultmann, op. cit., p. 147.

²²Bornkamm, op. cit., p. 147.

Man is God's Child

A child is totally dependent upon his father and receives from him everything, including the gift of life itself. The only thing children can ever give their father is praise and obedience for his gifts to them. The same can be said of man's relationship with his heavenly Father. He is God's child, and as such he is constantly and completely dependent upon the Lord in all his needs.²³ God will tolerate no one but children in His kingdom (Mt. 18:1-4), and children can never lay claim to merit from their father. Bultmann remarks:

Man must become like a child, who, knowing no such thing as appeal to any rights or merits of its own, is willing simply to be given a gift (Mk. 10:15). Those who proudly brag of their merits are an abomination to God (Lk. 16:15), and the virtue-proud Pharisee has to take a lower place than the guilt-conscious publican (Lk. 18:9-14). So Jesus rejects all this counting up of merit and reward. . . . And Jesus also refuses to regard the misfortune that befalls individuals as punishment for their special sins; no man is better than another (Lk. 13:1-5).²⁴

A child is both dependent upon his father and obedient to him. But this obedience is simply a grateful response to the father's gifts and grace. The example of Israel immediately comes to mind. Its election did not merely confer a divine favor. God's election of, and covenant with, the

²³Cf. Pesch, op. cit., p. 51.

²⁴Bultmann, op. cit., p. 14; cf. also Preisker, op. cit., pp. 724-725.

Hebrews demanded a response of loyalty and service. That response is found by Israel in the Sinai Covenant. Rowley's comments are to the point:

It [i.e., the Sinai Covenant] was not a commercial bargain or a legal contract, but rather Israel's pledge of loyalty to him who had first chosen and saved her. It laid no obligation on God, who had already of his free grace both pledged himself to Israel and given the evidence of his devotion to her in the deliverance he had wrought. On Israel's side it was as unconditional as God's deliverance of her had been.²⁵

Jacob makes the same point in another way:

To attain his purposes God places at the disposal of his people certain means which will preserve them in the love of God. The prophets and most distinctly Deuteronomy stress the role of the law as the most efficacious means of education for assuring the permanence of the election (Deut. 4.5-6, 32,36; 28.63; 30.9,11-14). . . .²⁶

Closely related to this is the fact that Israel's possession of Palestine was the result of God's swearing and not their striving. God was not giving the land to His Hebrews because of their faithfulness to Him, but because of His faithfulness to the oath which He swore to Abraham and the patriarchs (Deut. 9:4-5).

What is true of the Old Testament is also true of the New. Man's obedience is merely a response to God's kingdom

²⁵Rowley, op. cit., p. 69. The same thought is expressed in Brunner, op. cit., pp. 178-179; Walther Eichrodt, Theologie des Alten Testaments (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1940), Teil 3, p. 74; Procksch, op. cit., p. 238.

²⁶Jacob, op. cit., p. 112.

which has previously come to him by divine grace.²⁷ The kingdom is God's production, and not man's. It is His work, not ours.²⁸ The kingdom is God's gift to man (Luke 12:32). The point of Mark 4:3-8, 26-29 is that

the kingdom of God and its righteousness are not created by human will, human achievement, or voluntary effort. It comes, it grows, it ripens, it bears fruit "of itself."²⁹

This is not to say that one must not strive hard to enter the kingdom. It is grabbed forcefully only by men of violence (Mt. 11:12). This apparently refers to a complete summoning of all one's powers, to the serious and strenuous determination one must exercise to lay hold on the kingdom. Every sacrifice must be brought to receive it. Matthew 11:12 most forcefully illustrates the paradox of the kingdom. It exercises its force on man, that is, it works without man's help, yet only the forceful possess it. Man must work to have God's kingdom. It must be sought (Luke 12:31; Mt. 6:33) like a treasure in a field or a priceless pearl (Mt. 13:44-46). One must exercise intelligence in securing it (Luke 16:1-7). One must have the disposition

²⁷Strack-Billerbeck, op. cit., pp. 485-486.

²⁸See Karl L. Schmidt, "Βασιλεία," Theologisches Woerterbuch zum Neuen Testament, edited by Gerhard Kittel (Stuttgart: Verlag von W. Kohlhammer, 1933), I, 586.

²⁹Rudolph Otto, The Kingdom of God and the Son of Man, translated from the German by F. V. Felson and B. L. Woolf (London: Lutterworth Press, 1951), p. 113; also Schmidt, op. cit., p. 586.

of a child to enter it (Mt. 18:3). One must have a righteousness exceeding that of the Scribes and Pharisees (Mt. 5:20). It is hard for the rich to possess the kingdom (Mark 10:23). One must do the Father's will to enter it (Mt. 7:21). One must be willing to cut off offending body members to enter it (Mt. 18:9). One must repent for entrance into the kingdom (Mark 1:15).³⁰ All of this does not, however, obviate the fact that the kingdom is God's undeserved gift. And all one can do with a gift is to receive it as a child (Mark 10:15). Commenting on Luke 12:32, Cadoux says:

The documentary origin of this verse is uncertain; and we cannot therefore be very confident that Jesus really uttered the words: but the idea they convey is undoubtedly true to his representation of the Kingdom as a whole. So much is indisputable. . . .³¹

It is perfectly true, one must fulfill God's will to share in the salvation of His reign. But this means nothing more than an earnest hunger for the kingdom itself which is God's gift.³² Whether in Old or New Testament, God's demands are always preceded by His gifts, the greatest of which is Himself. The knowledge of belonging to God, having Him as one's personal possession, is the biggest of all rewards.

³⁰See Cecil John Cadoux, The Historic Mission of Jesus (New York: Harper and Brothers, n.d.), pp. 178ff.

³¹Ibid., pp. 178-179.

³²See Bultmann, op. cit., pp. 20-21.

Obedience is always preceded by a reception of divine goodness.³³ In the words of Amos Wilder:

God is bringing in his reign and his great deliverance. Do good, avoid evil, that you may be sons of such a Father, that men may see your good works and glorify him, that you may sanctify his name. The particular conduct urged is urged as the only conduct compatible with such a God. Any blessings envisaged are thought of not as a reward but as a free gift. The blessings precede the obedience, or at least the announcement of these precede it. God's work of blessing is fixed and sure, in any case. His mercy is the motive for conduct. Men do not live well to secure the mercy but in gratitude for it.

This positive character of the preaching of Jesus must be held in mind as the background of the teaching of rewards and punishments. . . . Good conduct is acceptance and acknowledgement of a great blessing, and its reward is simply the appropriation of it. Evil conduct is unwillingness and rejection of a positive blessing, and its punishment is the missing of that good.³⁴

The Beatitudes especially stress that man's obedience is only a response to God's grace.

The ethics called for in the Beatitudes are not so much ethics of obedience as ethics of grace. . . . The conduct that is praised and the blessings assigned to it are, indeed, presented indirectly in the form of condition and reward, the reward being eschatological. But here all desert aspect is precluded, and the reward is rather the gift of God.³⁵

Preisker sums it up nicely:

Und Reich Gottes ist ja allein Wundertat und Wundergabe Gottes, unvergleichlich und einzig an Wert, wie eben

³³Cf. Eichrodt, op. cit., p. 74.

³⁴Amos N. Wilder, Eschatology and Ethics (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1939), pp. 89-90.

³⁵Ibid., pp. 120-121.

nur Gott schenken kann . . . vor Gott kann der Mensch kein Verdienst im Vergleich zu solchen Lohn anbringen und bei den Menschen darf niemand auf Lohn spekulieren, weil er sich sonst in heuchlerisch-selbstuechtiger Enge ausserhalb der Begnadung durch die Liebe Gottes stellt.³⁶

Man is Poor and Wretched

The reward that Christ promises is to men who make their misery and despised circumstances the foundation for their new piety (Mt. 5:3ff.). The people who truly honor God recognize that they cannot storm into heaven on the basis of their deserts or merits; rather, they humbly and honestly admit their worthlessness and helplessness and realize God's kingdom is a gift to them.³⁷ The very fact that the kingdom is given to the "poor in spirit, mourners, the hungry and thirsty, the persecuted," underscores the fact that merit is out of the question. For people such as these can present God with nothing but their needs and their hunger for Him to fulfill those desires. It is not the doers of righteousness who are filled, but those who hunger and thirst for it, those who want it from the giver-God.

Man Stands in Constant Need of God's Mercy

This is essential for the proper understanding and interpretation of our Lord's presentation of the final

³⁶Preisker, op. cit., p. 724.

³⁷Cf. Pesch, op. cit., p. 78.

judgment (Mt. 25:31-46). At first and superficial glance it may seem that Jesus here maintains that heaven is the deserved reward of those who practice love toward their brothers. And certainly, it cannot be denied that eternal life is given to those who engage in charitable conduct, while it is withheld from those who refuse to be kind. It is readily admitted that those who close their hearts against their brother's needs are murderers, and murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them (1 John 3:14-18). But one should still remember that no matter how much good the righteous have done, it is still mercy that they receive in the day of judgment (Mt. 5:7). Stewart points out it is mercy for their own sins that the righteous need, and this indicates "how far Christ is removed from the point of view of those who felt they were entitled to claim a reward for their merit at the hand of God."³⁸

There Can Be No Merited Reward Because of the
Nature of God's Kingdom

The Kingdom is God's Gift to Man (Luke 12:32)

This is the way it must be. For since man stands before God as a guilty and condemned sinner, since he is God's slave completely accountable to the Lord for his life and

³⁸G. W. Stewart, "The Place of Rewards in the Teaching of Christ," The Expositor, X (1910), 239.

conduct, since he is God's child, totally dependent upon his heavenly Father for everything, the only thing man can do is to receive the gracious gifts God lavishes upon him.³⁹ He is never in a position to demand. This is the very reason our Lord so frequently points out that the kingdom is God's gift. For thereby He tones down and negates all thought of merited reward. Wilder comments:

Finally we note that Jesus goes out of his way often to minimize the reward motive and the merit concept by pointing to the hidden will, secret disposition and unreckoning grace of God as having the final word in the rewards of men. The last shall be first. Grace shall submerge reckonings. The Kingdom is a gift.⁴⁰

An Understanding of the Kingdom's Mysteries is a Divine Gift

It is impossible for man to grasp and comprehend the kingdom's secrets unless God reveals them to him (Mt. 13:11ff.). One's knowledge of the heavenly Father depends exclusively upon the will and choice of Christ the Son (Mt. 11:27). It is never a matter of human merit or achievement. For God reveals the kingdom's mysteries to "babes," people who have nothing but needs and the intense desire for God to fill them; He withholds such a revelation from the "wise and understanding," people who are sure they know when they

³⁹Pesch, op. cit., pp. 142-143; Wilder, op. cit., p. 87; Preisker, op. cit., p. 724; Bornkamm, op. cit., p. 152.

⁴⁰Wilder, op. cit., p. 87.

do not (Mt. 11:25-26). To the disciples it was given to know the mysteries of the kingdom. This was a gift withheld from the Scribes and Pharisees and the majority of the Jews because of their dull ears and blind eyes (Mt. 13:10-16).

Therefore, the Rewards of the Kingdom
are also God's Gift

If the kingdom itself is God's gift, if an understanding of its mysteries is God's gift, then so are all its rewards.

In diesen Zusammenhang, in dem es immer wieder um das freie, koenigliche, vaeterliche Geschenk des Gottesreiches und das Beschenktwerden und Empfangen geht, gehoert die Botschaft vom Lohne Gottes hinein.⁴¹

There Can Be No Merited Reward Because of the
Nature of the Reward Itself

The Reward is not Always in Keeping
with One's Deserts

There are a number of Biblical facts which prove this. For one thing, there is the repeated complaint from the lips of the righteous that they must often suffer while the wicked enjoy prosperity. The righteous are sometimes involved in the disasters which the unrighteous bring upon

⁴¹Bornkamm, op. cit., p. 152.

the community to which they belong. Neither saint nor sinner can ever completely detach himself from the society to which he belongs, and for this reason saints are afflicted with sinners and sinners sometimes prosper with saints. This clearly demonstrates that there is no unbreakable equation between one's desert and fortune.⁴²

Secondly, it is a fact that God punishes the children for their father's sins (Ex. 20:5; Jer. 16:3). This is not to deny that each man bears his own guilt before God and receives due recompense for it (Ezk. 18). But if it is true that a great-great-grandchild can suffer for the sins of his great-great-grandfather it is perfectly obvious that there is no rigid equation between one's merit and lot.⁴³ The general rule, however, is that the righteous will be happy and the wicked will suffer. When this is not the case, it is more the exception than the rule.⁴⁴

Thirdly, there are the lives of individual saints. Joseph was a good man, yet he had to endure the shame and affliction of slavery and abuse in Egypt.⁴⁵ Job was a man of apparently flawless integrity, yet he had to undergo

⁴²Rowley, op. cit., pp. 103-104.

⁴³This is the tension in Jeremiah. See ibid., p. 105.

⁴⁴G. F. Oehler, Theology of the Old Testament, translated from the German by George E. Day (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1883), pp. 195-196.

⁴⁵Cf. Rowley, op. cit., pp. 111-112.

sufferings almost to the breaking point. This simply could not have happened if God were bound to bless the righteous. But as the closing chapters of Job so pointedly show, God is never under obligation to His creatures. Their only choice before Him is to humble themselves in humility and repentance (Job 40:4; 42:5-6). For man can never remonstrate with his Maker. The Lord's sphere of justice is bigger and wider than that of His creatures. Man has his concepts and laws of righteousness, and God has His. If ever there is disharmony between the two, it is not that God's law is contrary to man's; it simply transcends it.⁴⁶

There are also some New Testament characters whose lot underscores that there is no simple equation between desert and fortune. One calls to mind the Galileans whose blood Pilate spilled with their sacrifices and the eighteen upon whom the tower in Siloam fell. Our Lord makes it plain that these people died not because they were especially vile sinners whose punishment from God was in strict keeping with their crimes; rather, their death was a call to repentance for the living (Luke 13:1-5). One thinks here also of the man born blind. It was the firm conviction of the disciples that the man himself or his parents must have committed some terrible sin for him to have such a malady (John 9:1-2).

⁴⁶ See J. Pedersen, Israel, Its Life and Culture, translated from the Swedish by Geoffrey Cumberlege (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), I-II, 373.

Jesus quickly sets them straight. The man's blindness does not stem from his or his parents' sin. It has come about so that God's great works might shine in him through the miraculous healing effected by Christ. This is not to overlook the fact that sickness is the result of sin. It is to say, rather, that it is not always possible to trace every illness back to a certain sin that caused it. And if this is true, then there is no absolute law of merit and lot.

Finally, one must consider here our Lord's parable of the vineyard (Mt. 20:1-16). Jesus spoke this parable in answer to Peter's question concerning the rewards of those who leave all to follow the Christ (Mt. 19:27). Several facts must be borne in mind: (1) The earthly reward for Christ's followers includes persecution (Mark 10:30). Yet this is impossible if God is bound to bring only prosperity upon the righteous. Once again, the gracious aspect of the divine reward becomes apparent, or perhaps, more properly, it is shown that material happiness is not bound to follow holiness as Deuteronomy 28:1-14 seems to suggest. (2) It is to be noted that the earthly reward is disproportionately great to the service performed (Mt. 19:29). The reward is a hundred times greater than the work done. (3) The point of the parable is indicated by the proverb that frames it (Mt. 19:30). "But many that are first shall be last, and the last shall be first." These words convey the meaning of the parable. It is a story designed to show God's grace,

God's "unbargain-like" dealings with His kingdom workers. The "last," those who were hired last and who worked the least receive the same salary as those who were hired first and worked the longest. Human reason and law cry "Unfair!" and that is precisely why those who bore the burden and heat of the day felt they had a legitimate gripe and began to grumble against the vineyard owner. It was not so much that they were being cheated as it was a case of giving more than was due to the lately hired workers who did so little. The owner was not operating on a "you get what you earn" basis. The "first" and the "last" both received the same, no matter what their efforts.

Even so God deals with men. This is the whole thrust and stress of the parable. It begins by portraying the contract between the owner and his workers. The contract details are precisely stated: "Work a day, and you will receive a denarius." There is a purpose in this preciseness. For it helps accentuate the surprising ending of the story. According to the owner's decision and discretion all workers, those who worked long and those who worked little, are paid alike. Such action on the part of the owner runs counter to all justice in human relations; no fair salary agreement could be set up on the basis of such principles. The principle of commensurate pay for work done is thus vitiated by the strange twist at the story's end. The owner's concluding words make it clear why this principle

of desert and fortune is set aside. Contrary to all human thoughts and laws of wage and merit, the sovereignty of God appears and is portrayed in His grace and goodness. He gives the same to last and first, to deserving and undeserving. For His is the unquestioned right to do as He wills with His possessions. And that will is to reward all alike, irrespective of merit. Certainly, the words of Paul are a fitting summary of this parable: "But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested" (Rom. 3:21). It is not law, a "you get what you deserve" principle that governs God's relationship with man; rather it is love, a love that takes no account of human efforts or deserts but gives to all indiscriminately pardon and eternal life. Even the wicked receive God's sunshine and showers (Mt. 5:45).

This parable lays bare the gracious heart of God. But it also reveals the jealous and loveless heart of man. It shows man as he often is, governed by the rigid principle of merit and lot, and offended by the grace of God. Man often refuses to rejoice over God's grace, because it goes contrary to his concept of right and wrong and just deserts. Like the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son the grumblers in this story were unhappy over God's grace to another. There is the implication and veiled indictment in both parables that the father and the owner have dealt unjustly with those who obviously deserve more than they are receiving on the basis of their past performance.

There is also the plea on the part of both the father and the owner for understanding from those registering complaint, that they might be happy and not bitter or derisive.

Thus the point of the parable is made. Peter and the rest of the twelve will indeed receive their rewards of discipleship. But they need not think that because they are the first in a long line of Christian disciples that their reward will thereby be greater. There is always the possibility and danger of a reversal in the status of disciples: "The first shall be last, and the last shall be first." The saying occurs both at the beginning and at the end of the parable; and for good reason. Just as in the parable of the prodigal son, the elder brother, though he stayed at home and worked faithfully for his father, became the lost son because he refused to share in his father's joy and grace, so the first laborers excluded themselves from a participation in the owner's joy and an experience of his goodness by their insistence on their just deserts and by their envy of their co-workers.

The point of the story is in the closing verses. The parable stresses the transcendent and sovereign freedom God rightly exercises in dispensing His mercy and goodness to men who do not deserve it. The concept of what is fair and just is not thereby excluded; it is rather included. It is considered and condemned. For when God displays His grace, He puts man to shame and censures him. For the parable

most clearly shows that in his demand for justice and equity man only reveals his own selfishness. His thoughts are controlled by envy and self-determination. The reward of this parable is a gift and display of divine grace, not the wages which human effort earns or demands.⁴⁷

The Reward is Disproportionately Great

It is perfectly true that Christ promises rewards to His disciples. But these rewards are a hundred times greater than the service performed (Mt. 19:29). It is this fact which moves Preisker to conclude: "So bricht hier schon durch, dass der Lohn nicht menschliches Verdienst ist, sondern Guete Gottes."⁴⁸ Surely, the sacrifice demanded by Christian discipleship is great, but the rewards are many times greater. Yet, this could not be the case, if God were to repay man's services on a strictly bargain-like basis. The very fact that the steward who is faithful over a few things is made manager over many (Mt. 25:21) indicates that the divine reward does not rest on a strict quantitative equivalence between service and salary.⁴⁹

The reward, however, is not arbitrary, bearing no relationship to the service performed. The merciful receive

⁴⁷See Strack-Billerbeck, op. cit., pp. 485ff.; Preisker, op. cit., p. 723; Bornkamm, op. cit., pp. 156-164.

⁴⁸Preisker, op. cit., p. 722.

⁴⁹Cf. Stewart, op. cit., p. 233.

mercy; the forgivers are forgiven; those who confess Christ are confessed by Him before the Father; the humble are exalted; the life-losers are life-finders. Stewart comments:

Evidently the recompense which Christ holds before us is no arbitrary reward which bears no inner relation to the nature of the conduct which receives it. It is rather the development to fuller perfection of that love of righteousness that inspires it, the crowning with success of the effort that finds expression in it.⁵⁰

There Can Be No Merited Reward Because
of the Nature of Sin

Sin is the Only "Payer"

God can never be man's debtor because sin alone pays a salary. God only gives the free gift of eternal life (Rom. 6:23). The contrast in this verse is unmistakable. Sin is the only one from whom can man ever demand anything. Sin is the only one obligated to man. And that debt is man's own destruction. This is the only thing man has ever earned--his own death. This is his salary for a life of service to sin. God, on the other hand, who owes man nothing, freely and graciously gives him eternal life. God owes no one anything; for sin alone is man's debtor, God is man's Giver, the Giver of pardon and eternal life.

⁵⁰Ibid.

CHAPTER IV

A FEW CONCLUSIONS ON THE PURPOSE OF THE REWARD CONCEPT

The Negative Side

Certainly, the reward concept is not meant to cater to man's already robust selfishness. Still, it should be remembered, as Wilder points out:

The appeal to self-interest involved in the proposal of rewards and punishments is not hastily to be condemned. Morality motivated by reward is inferior only as the reward is arbitrary and external. Where the reward is of the nature of necessary consequence flowing from the conduct and the conditions, it escapes this indictment.¹

The Jewish rabbis regarded the offering of rewards an educational method for motivating to more righteous living. The thinking was this: Let a man obey God from an ulterior motive for reward, and eventually he will be holy not for the reward but for righteousness' sake alone.² Still, "It is all very well and good to say that 'virtue is its own reward,' but the reward motive is still present for him who thus reflects."³ And, although it is true, as Bultmann

¹Amos N. Wilder, Eschatology and Ethics in the Teaching of Jesus (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1939), pp. 82-83.

²Ibid., p. 84.

³Ibid., p. 86.

remarks, that Jesus holds out rewards to those who obey God's will without the reward motive, it is equally true that Christ employs the idea of reward as a legitimate motive for obeying God's demands (Mt. 6:19f.; Mark 10:21).⁴ How shall we resolve this "self-contradiction," as Bultmann calls it, in Christ's words? Bultmann answers that the reward motive is employed by Jesus chiefly for the purpose of inspiring the saint to strive for the perfect and ideal sanctification which the Scriptures present as his life's goal. If the reward motive serves to advance the saint toward the realization of that goal it is legitimate.⁵

It should be remembered, however, that our Lord often went out of His way to de-emphasize the reward motive. "The last shall be first. Grace shall submerge reckonings. The Kingdom is a gift."⁶ The Beatitudes clearly stress this: "The ethics called for in the Beatitudes are not so much ethics of obedience as ethics of grace."⁷

The conduct that is praised and the blessings assigned to it are, indeed, presented indirectly in the form of condition and reward, the reward being eschatological. But here all desert aspect is precluded, and the reward

⁴Rudolph Bultmann, Theology of the New Testament, translated from the German by Kendrick Grobel (New York: Charles Scribners' Sons, 1951), I, 14.

⁵Ibid., p. 15.

⁶Wilder, op. cit., p. 87.

⁷Ibid., p. 120.

is rather the gift of God.⁸

The Positive Side

There are some sound reasons why the Scriptures speak of God's reward to man.

The Reward Stresses God's Love and Grace

We have made this point previously.⁹ The master is never obligated to reward his slave. If he chooses to do so, it is an act of sheer grace. Thus, the reward concept, far from excluding and negating the idea of divine grace, only serves to glorify it.

The Reward Emphasizes Man's Worth

Wilder's comment is extremely enlightening here:

The concept of reward has this in its favor, moreover; it goes with a view of life that affirms the worth of the self and the validity of the best personal satisfactions. And herein is Jesus' attitude set over against a strictly ascetic view, against the view, namely, that annihilation of self is the claim that God makes of men.¹⁰

Wilder goes on to point out that it is not selfish to seek salvation for one's own soul as long as such salvation does not mean the damnation of another. For Jesus taught that

⁸Ibid., p. 121.

⁹Supra, pp. 64ff.

¹⁰Wilder, op. cit., p. 86.

we save ourselves by service to others. suffer with patience

The Reward Motivates to Holiness

Although it is admitted that the reward concept can be abused and serve to increase man's selfishness,¹¹ it is still a legitimate inspiration to holiness (Mt. 6:1ff.).¹² The righteous will indeed be rewarded. This is not so much an appeal to self-interest as it is to "moral and religious discernment."¹³ The appeal is to "gratitude, homage, imitation."¹⁴ The conduct demanded by Christ is the only kind compatible with the blessing God has already bestowed with or without such conduct--that is, the blessing of divine sonship. Man is to act in keeping with that gracious blessing, not primarily for the sake of the reward that follows.¹⁵

The Reward Helps to Endure Suffering

How much more willingly and bravely the righteous can endure afflictions for Christ's sake when they recall that such suffering brings a wonderful heavenly reward (Mt. 5:10-

¹¹Cf. supra, p. 83.

¹²See Robert Mayer, "The Reward Concept in the Synoptic Gospels" (unpublished Master's thesis, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, 1955), p. 90.

¹³Wilder, op. cit., p. 88.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 89.

¹⁵Ibid.

11). Certainly, one's determination to suffer with patience and courage is steeled when it is remembered that "he who endures to the end will be saved" (Mt. 10:22). And what strength and comfort there is in the fact that our present light and momentary burdens are working for us glory far heavier and eternal (2 Cor. 4:17).

The Reward Helps Remind Man of His Slave Status

The reward concept expresses the basic and fundamental fact that man is related to God in a service relationship. The Lord rightfully expects and demands from his slaves that they give Him constant and undivided service. The reward concept serves continually to remind man of this fact and to inspire him to greater and more dedicated loyalty to his divine Master.

The Reward Helps Remind Man that God is His Judge¹⁶

The thought of reward is inevitably joined with the realization that man is accountable to God and awaits from Him final judgment. The reward concept constantly reminds man that he is completely responsible to God who will one

¹⁶ See Guenther Bornkamm, "Der Lohngedanke im Neuen Testament," Evangelische Theologie, Heft 2/3 (1946), pp. 147ff.

day acquit or condemn him, and that man dare never develop an ethic according to his own standards. He stands constantly under the eye of a holy God whom he must one day face for the final and irrevocable verdict upon all of life's thoughts, words and deeds. Everything man thinks, speaks or does has certain fixed consequences--either for good or for evil. God does not forget or overlook either the good man fails to do or the evil he performs. Nor is man's righteousness, be it ever so small and unheralded, ever hidden from the divine eye. All is recorded in the open book (Rev. 20:13), even the giving of a cup of water to a thirsty brother (Mt. 10:42) as well as every empty, profitless word that escapes our lips (Mt. 12:36). The reward concept makes us continually aware of the temporal and eternal consequences of good or ill that flow from every word or deed. This awareness, plus the expectation of final judgment, forces man to reflect upon the seriousness of every decision in life. For whether man admits it or not, whether he realizes it or not, he is absolutely accountable to God and must one day receive his reward, his eternal sentence.

The reward concept reminds man that God is his Judge. Furthermore, it expresses the fact that judgment is meted out individually. It emphatically rules out all collectivism, all "group insurance." Each man must appear before Jesus the Judge to receive an eternal verdict based solely upon what he has done or failed to do (2 Cor. 5:10).

The reward concept thus becomes a needed and constant reminder of the indissoluble connection between man's temporal deeds and his eternal fate.

The Reward Concept Proclaims Man's Creatureliness

Although it is true that the idea of a reward emphasizes man's worth,¹⁷ it gives equal stress to his creatureliness. The reward concept makes it quite clear that man cannot find the consummation, the end and goal of his being in himself. God must crown all life with His gracious rewards. Thus the thought of a divine reward is a constant proclamation of man's limitations and lowliness and of God's unspeakable grace.

¹⁷Supra, p. 85.

CHAPTER V

FINAL CONCLUSIONS AND SUMMARY

We have set down two apparently contradictory propositions: (1) God offers a reward; (2) God offers no reward. The paradox quickly disappears when one adds the necessary modifying phrase to each statement: (1) God offers a reward of grace; (2) God offers no reward of merit.

The Reward is not of Merit

The Scriptures are replete with references to God's rewards. But wherever the thought occurs it must be understood against the background of the God-man relationship. Man is God's slave, and the slave belongs to his master, life and limb. In this relationship only the master is free, the slave forever in debt. The master is entitled to make every demand upon his slave and to command his constant, whole-hearted obedience. That is why it is impossible for a slave to serve two masters (Mt. 6:24). The master rightfully claims the slave's total abilities and strength (Luke 17:7). He surrenders to the slave's management the goods and possessions that he chooses (Mt. 25:14ff.) and can demand them from him again whenever he desires (Mt. 18:23ff.). The slave has no possessions of his own, and the service he renders is not of his own choice (1 Cor. 9:16). His service is not there for his sake, but for its own

sake. In this service he is required to be faithful, faithful not to his own will, but to that of his master. To that master the slave is responsible whether he lives or dies.

In the light of this relationship the reward concept is foreign and unfounded. For slaves do not receive wages; they do not have property of their own, but are rather the property of their master. Wages are paid only to hired servants whom the master engages for a particular work and for a particular time. They are "laborers" [ἐργαταί], "husbandmen" [γεωργοί], "hirelings" [μισθωτοί], but not slaves [δούλολ] in the strict sense of the term. Of these hired hands it is true: "The laborer is worthy of his hire" (Luke 10:7; 1 Tim. 5:18). The owner contracts them for services and then releases them after the work is done. And with the dismissal from labor all bonds of fellowship with the master are broken. Neither owes the other anything.

There is a definite contrast between slaves and hired hands. The latter has a degree of personal freedom, while the former does not. The hired laborer can enter into contract with the master; he can accept or reject the terms offered; he can claim and demand the stipulated wage after he has performed his work. At the same time, his relationship to his employer is contractual and not personal, like that of the slave. In fact it is through his slaves that the

master deals with his hired workers, the husbandmen (Mt. 21:33ff.). The hired shepherds receive only derogatory remarks from the Good Shepherd's lips (John 10:12,13). The slaves, on the other hand, belong to the master and have a very intimate and personal relationship with him. They assist in the preparations for the great supper; they experience directly the personal blessing or punishment of the master (Luke 12:35ff.). The master considers anything done to his servants as done to him, and therefore his anger is kindled by the abuse that his slaves receive from the hired vinedressers (Mt. 21:33ff.), and from the guests invited to the marriage dinner (Mt. 22:1ff.). Love done to fellow slaves is done to the master; love withheld from fellow slaves is love withheld from the master (Mt. 25:31-46).

This master-slave relationship does not cease even upon entrance into the heavenly kingdom. At the day of reckoning the slave is entrusted with newer and higher responsibilities (Mt. 25:21). The writer of the Apocalypse envisions God's saints serving Him constantly in the heavenly church (Rev. 7:15). The joys of heaven are not payment in full which terminates the relationship of service. Rather, the slave remains in the service of his lord even though he is permitted to enter the master's joys.

There can be no reward of merit because man is God's eternal slave. Therefore, the only debts one can legitimately talk about are those man owes God. These debts are

sin, disloyal, imperfect service to God, the Master. Since man cannot pay this debt, Christ taught us to pray: "Forgive us our debts [ὀφειλόμενα], as we forgive our debtors" (Mt. 6:12). This God does through Christ (1 John 1:7).

The Reward is of Grace

This is both the logical and the theological conclusion one must draw. For if the reward is not of merit, then it must be of grace. The fact that God is not obligated to reward his slaves does not preclude the fact that He can and does. The master can do absolutely as he wills with his slaves. And if he desires to reward them for their services that is his prerogative. Yet the fact that he does reward them does not indicate that he must. It is still slaves who are being rewarded, and slaves only owe; they can never demand. In Romans 4:4 the reward according to grace is set forth as the only alternative to man's meriting the debt he has incurred in breaking God's law. God's grace therefore does not exclude but includes a reward in His dealings with man.

The reward is of grace. This becomes apparent when one remembers that the reward exceeds all expectations and calculations based on merit. For their "service" of sacrifice the disciples will receive a hundred times greater reward. Such a reward is not pay in the strict sense, the amount of

which is figured by legal right and payable upon demand for value received. Such a reward is a bestowal of grace, a salary that goes far beyond the work done. Thus, the reward concept is completely removed from the sphere of justice and calculated earnings. This must be the case, if the last worker receives the same wage as that of the first (Mt. 20:9-16).

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